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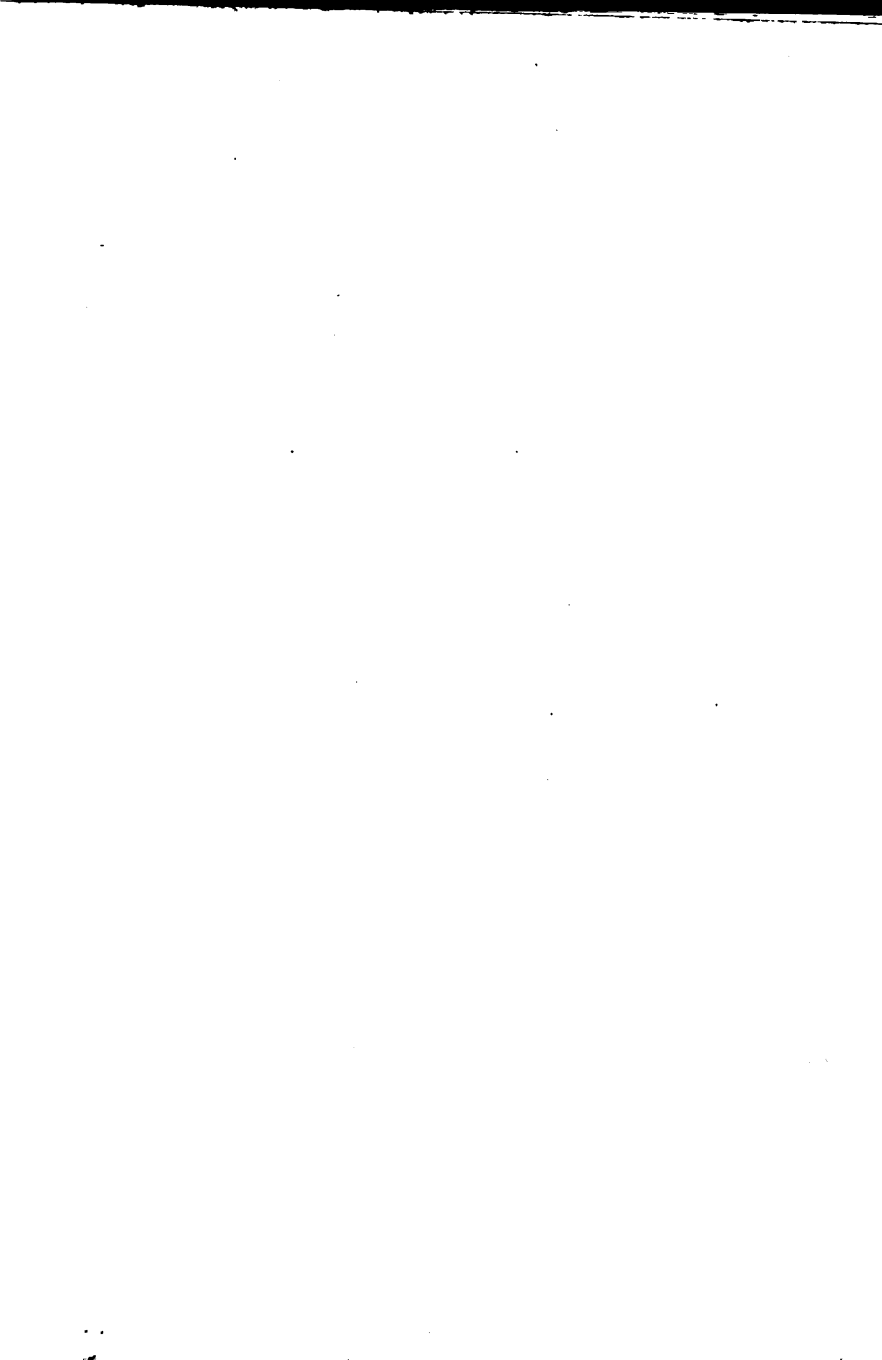
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HEART'S DELIGHT.

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HEART'S DELIGHT

A Fable

BY CHARLES GIBBON

AUTHOR OF 'ROBIN GRAY,' 'THE GOLDEN SHAFT,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

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HEART'S DELIGHT.



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CHAPTER XXI.

THE APPEAL.

WHAT was this man—mesmerist, clairvoyant, demon?—that he had the power to affect her imagination so strangely? Would she be able to resist his power, and to triumph over it in the end? How could she do that if they took Kenneth away from her?

She felt that the shadows in the rough sketch of Cairndhu were meant for Kenneth and herself. Rude and grotesque as they were, there was something in the outlines which was to her eyes unmistakable.

Her perception of the likeness was no doubt quickened by her remembrance of their meeting, and of the fact that she had observed how distinct their shadows were, reflected on the ground and on the cairn. She had been right, then, when she gave the alarm at which Kenneth laughed. Wardlaw had been there, watching them, listening to them ; and now, in this subtle way, he told her so. He cunningly represented them as mere shadows, as if he would symbolize that their love was nothing more.

At another time this suggestion would have provoked in her only contemptuous laughter ; but at present, after hours of unhappy brooding, she was nervous and easily startled. The sudden revelation that Wardlaw had overheard her warning Kenneth against him distressed and confused her, whilst at the same time it impressed her the more deeply with the belief that the instinctive fear or repugnance with which the man inspired her had its origin in some

keener sensibility of her nature than she yet understood.

‘My head is aching,’ she whispered to her father. ‘I cannot speak to anyone to-night. Make excuses for me, papa—I must go to my room.’

Without waiting for his sanction, or to say good-night to anyone, she passed quickly from the apartment.

All this was so unlike her natural ways that she felt ashamed and angry. Her head was aching badly enough, and yet she could not lie down. There was a feverish restlessness upon her which seemed to indicate the approach of hysterics. She had never experienced that distressing malady, but she had seen one of her school-companions under its influence when too abruptly informed of her mother’s death, and the remembrance of the poor girl’s fits of wild sobbing, laughter, broken at intervals with shrieks of pain, whilst the big tears were running down her cheeks, came back to

Milly with appalling vividness at this moment.

But she was not to give way to this weakness. On the occasion which had recurred to her memory, the doctor had said that hysterical affections might be checked by a strong effort of the will. She would make that effort, for there was important work to be done. She would think about that, and recover nerve to act.

This Wardlaw had succeeded in gaining the confidence of Kenneth as he had gained her father's. Somehow they must be roused to caution before they trusted him too far. She had not yet any idea of how she was to accomplish it, as so far she had little to say against the man except that she suspected him of something; but what the something was she did not know. Kenneth had already told her that she was prejudiced against Wardlaw, because she believed that he had come to force himself upon her as a suitor. Her father would

ridicule the notion that he could be deceived in his judgment of the character of any man he had chosen to call friend. A reference to the picture which was the immediate cause of her excitement might have some influence upon her lover, but it would have none upon her father.

She summoned her maid. This was a discreet person of thirty or thereabout, who, if doomed for a time to bear the commonplace surname of Smith, rejoiced in the possession of two big-sounding baptismal cognomens, thanks to the aristocratic proclivities of her mother, who had been a washerwoman in Clerkenwell. The proclivity—or mania—which inspires the bestowal of grand names upon their feminine offspring is common amongst the poorest class of Londoners, as if they sought in this way to compensate the child for the poverty to which it is born. But when the damsels thus dowered go out to service the unfeeling “missus” generally

rechristens them with some work-a-day name, such as Ann, Jane, or Mary; and the girls as a rule submit to the alteration whilst they are within doors. So Adelaide Evelina Smith was obliged to answer to her plain surname when her young mistress (acting under her father's instruction) or the master called; but she took care that everyone else in the house should be made aware of the refined taste which had presided over her baptism.

Smith was sensible of the important fact that her lot had been cast in a pleasant place. She had good wages, a tolerant mistress, and little work, for Milly's energetic spirit was most contented when she waited on herself. Smith liked good living, and here she got it; she believed herself born to be a lady of boundless wealth, because she found it so agreeable to pass her time doing nothing. Here she had plenty of leisure to practise the part she hoped some day to play, for she had plenty of

leisure in which to read romances wherein she could find long words and bombastic phrases. These it was her delight to declaim—with more or less accuracy—amongst the domestics, some of whom stared in wondering ignorance, whilst the opinion of the others was put into words by old Malcolm Fraser, the shepherd :

‘ She’s just clean gyte wi’ her dictionary words, and I hae nae patience wi’ them. Fat ails her at the plain language that the Lord Himsel’ made use o’ when He spoke on the Mount ? It’s just a’ vanity.’

Smith was too superior to the ‘ Scotch canals ’ (*canaille* she meant) to take any further notice of their comments than might be expressed by pursing her lips into a languid smile of scorn.

She was, in her way, fond of her young mistress ; but in the course of her romance-reading she had invariably found the lady’s-maid occupying the important rôle of con-

fidante and general go-between in clandestine love-affairs. No such confidence was reposed in her, and that was particularly disappointing, as, from her own observation, aided by Mrs. Woodleigh's kind inquiries, she believed that there was an understanding between her mistress and Kenneth Gordon, which, not being approved of by Sir George, would have afforded full play for her imagination. If Milly had trusted her, Smith would have been the most devoted of slaves; but she was not trusted, and therefore was inclined to be spiteful. She was too much mentally muddled by her romantic desires and Mrs. Woodleigh's sweet suggestions to suspect that Milly had nothing to confide. There were no billets-doux to be conveyed by stratagem through the midst of ferocious guards; not even a verbal message of invitation or warning to the impatient lover. It did not occur to her that such subterfuges were unnecessary, considering that the swain was a guest in

THE APPEAL.

the house and unfettered in his communications with the fair lady.

But a woman of Smith's intensely sentimental disposition could not do otherwise than resent this absence of mystery in her young mistress's affairs, however plain it might appear that there was nothing to be mysterious about. Nay, this latter fact was, in her eyes, an aggravation of the offence, for it allowed her no opportunity to display the great talent she possessed for intrigue ; it gave her no chance of acquiring the knowledge of secrets which would make her the mistress of her mistress. Consequently, as there was no demand for her talents in one direction, she was willing enough to exercise them for the benefit of Mrs. Woodleigh and Drummond Wardlaw when called upon.

‘ I shall not want you again to-night, Smith ; but I am going out early in the morning.’

That was another objectionable habit of

Miss Kerr's ; she would get up at hours which were to the London-bred maid outrageously inconvenient. According to Smith they were a little too far beyond the middle of the night to be agreeable, and a great deal too far in advance of the time at which a lady should begin the business of the day, with breakfast at eleven forenoon. But the advantages of the situation enabled the maid to endure even this unfashionable idiosyncrasy.

‘ Very well, miss ; but shall I not assist you to disrobe before I retire ? ’ (It was impossible for Smith to say ‘ help you to take off your things ’.)

‘ You need not mind to-night, thank you. I am only going to put on my dressing-gown just now, and it may be some time before I go to bed. Good-night.’

‘ Good-night, miss ; ’ and Smith, with a dancing-school curtsey, ‘ retired,’ but not to rest.

She fancied that at last she was about to

penetrate some secret of Miss Milly's. What was her mistress going to sit up for? There could not be a nocturnal meeting of the lovers to detect, for then there would have been no mention of the dressing-gown. Ah! but perhaps the reference to that garment was merely intended to throw dust in too inquisitive eyes. Perhaps she was only going to write a love-letter. Well, a perusal of its contents would be sure to reveal something interesting, and maybe profitable. At any rate, Smith's curiosity was abnormally excited, and she took measures to gratify it accordingly.

Milly did put on her dressing-gown, a pale, soft, lavender thing, with no other trimming than a row of small velvet bows down the front, and she looked very charming in it. She did not write a love-letter or any other kind of letter; and we know that she had not made an assignation with Kenneth.

But she was going to see some one; she

was expecting some one, for she opened the door several times, and twice went to the top of the staircase and looked down into the hall. She could hear occasional sounds of laughter from the billiard-room, and she returned to her own chamber with an air of disappointment.

All these movements were observed and noted by Smith, who, from the upper landing, could see whatever passed below. Her room was immediately above that of her mistress, and over her bedstead hung a bell which Milly could ring at any moment without leaving her couch. But the bell had never been used by Milly except in the mornings, when, after being up and dressed for an hour, she considered it necessary to awaken her sleepy-headed attendant. Smith, however, was not so somnolently disposed as she seemed.

Sir George's room was next to that of his daughter, and on the other side of the corridor was Mrs. Woodleigh's. The princi-

pal guest-rooms were in the new wing of the mansion.

At length Milly heard her father closing his door. She had been waiting for this, and her purpose was to go to him at once. Now that the moment had come, she hesitated and trembled a little. But fearing that this was a return of the weakness she had so valiantly overcome, she made another effort of will and regained self-control. She was about to go to her father, when she heard his door reopen, and presently a knock at her own door, accompanied by her father's voice :

‘ I want to see you, Milly ; can I come in ? ’

She flung open the door, and her face was lighted with a joyful smile.

‘ What, not abed yet ? ’ the father exclaimed, patting her head as if relieved by seeing her. ‘ You might have come back to the drawing-room if you intended to be up so late. Headache quite gone—eh ? ’

‘Not quite, papa.’

‘Then why don’t you get into bed? I should not have disturbed you, but I could not rest without seeing you. I never saw you look so white as you did this evening, and had half a mind to send for the doctor.’

‘You are the only doctor who can do me any good,’ was the somewhat nervous response.

‘Oh, well, in that case we shall save fees. But let me see—how shall I prescribe? What is the ailment?’

She led him to an easy-chair, drew a hassock close to his feet, and seated herself on it. Then she clasped her hands over his knees and looked up earnestly into his face.

‘You will think me very silly, papa. I have been waiting and longing for you to come upstairs.’

‘You might do that without being silly, you goose! Your mother did it before you, and I always believed that she was

the most sensible woman I ever came across.'

Sir George chuckled good-naturedly at his own little pleasantry. Milly continued to gaze at him with serious eyes.

'But my mother never waited for you with such an appeal as I have to make.' Her voice faltered slightly, and there were signs of fast-rising tears in her eyes. The father was perplexed by her singular manner.

'I cannot think of anything you may want, Milly, that I will not be ready to grant. But I wish you would not look so anxious ; your face is as careworn as if you were going to plead for your life to a hard-hearted judge. Come, whatever it is, out with it, and do not keep me in suspense.'

Milly turned her eyes from his face, bending her head a little towards her clasped hands, and thus, unconsciously, making the attitude of appeal more impressive. She did not speak for a few

seconds, and brief as the pause was it changed her father's perplexity into anxiety.

'Come, Milly, speak!' he said, with a shade of impatience. 'What is it?'

'People say you are very rich,' she answered slowly, as if meditating over every word.

'For once gossip is not far wrong; but I thought you had reason enough to be aware of that fact without requiring the assurance of outsiders.'

'People say you have as much wealth as anyone can desire,' she went on in the same measured accents as before, and still without looking up.

'That is very good of them to settle things so comfortably for me.' (He was chuckling again.) 'Perhaps I have as much as I ought to desire; but I never yet heard of a man who had as much as he desired.'

'It would not matter very much to you if this land-speculation proved a failure?'

'Well, no . . . not very much; but of

course I should be mortally chagrined if it did turn out a bad investment, and you would be sorry too, I suppose ?'

'It would not matter very much to you if the speculation were not entered upon at all ?' she proceeded, as if asking questions in a dream.

Sir George placed one hand under her chin, the other on her head, and turned the face upward. After scanning it closely—

'What are you driving at, Milly ?' he inquired persuasively, but with symptoms of uneasiness in his manner. 'We might let the thing pass without feeling much disturbed about it. But then you see it is such a chance for Gordon, and I have pledged my word to see him through it. I can't draw back at the last minute, as if I was frightened.'

She suddenly rose, and resting her hands on his shoulders, bowed her head.

'I do not want Kenneth to go away,' she said in a low voice, with a strain of

suppressed sobs in it. 'I do not want him to go upon this adventure, for I know that it will bring sorrow to us all. Say you will tell him that you have abandoned the scheme. . . . That is the appeal I had to make. Oh, father, you have been good to me in everything—be good to me in this, and say that Kenneth is not to go !'

Sir George was disturbed, for a breathing-space was disposed to be angry ; but that passed, and once more conscience pricked him for the wickedness of pretending that generosity prompted the act which had its spring in his own ambitious aims.

'You seemed to be pleased enough with the idea when I first mentioned it,' he began awkwardly, but regaining faith in the honesty of his purpose as he proceeded, the voice became firmer. 'How have you changed your mind ? Has he been complaining ? Yet I need not ask that, for it is scarcely an hour since he was speaking

enthusiastically of the project. He sees in it what I see—a fortune for himself, as well as something good for us. I have raised his hopes very high—how can you ask me to dash them to the ground almost before the breath which inspired them has grown cold ?’

She felt the truth of this, accepted it as a rebuke, and was painfully conscious that she had no substantial argument to oppose to the views of her father and lover.

‘Does he really wish to go ?’ she asked faintly.

‘He is eager to go now that he understands what he may expect from the enterprise.’

‘Then I have nothing more to say.’

There was a sigh in the voice that uttered these words of resignation.

CHAPTER XXII.

A TALISMAN.

It needed all Sir George's skill in the arts of diplomacy to enable him to avoid yielding to his daughter's prayer, and then all the casuistic reasoning which he could command was required to reconcile his conscience to the fact that he had not yielded.

‘It is for her good, and the loon's good too, confound him, if they would only look at it in a sensible way!’

This was the flattering unction he laid to his soul, and if constant repetition of it could have brought entire relief from troubling, he should have been in the full enjoyment of that blissful condition. It was the first request of importance which Milly

had preferred, and he refused. He did not like the position ; he did not like her pale face and the unnaturally bright anxious eyes ; he would have preferred to have seen tears in them, although he did not like tears either.

‘ If she had given me even a hint of one sound reason for this sudden change in her ideas concerning the advantages we are offering Gordon, then I might have reconsidered things. But she gave me none, and I must do my duty according to my lights. I must not hesitate again. The affair is settled.’

He permitted himself an extra strong night-cap in order to make up for the unusual ruffling of his nerves. He slept well, and had visions of coronets.

When Kenneth entered the library on the forenoon of the succeeding day he found the knight as fresh and complaisant as ever. They entered upon business at once. Kenneth displayed such a mastery of the whole

subject, such a grasp of the figures, and such a keen perception of the flaws in the grandiloquent statements of the prospectors who had acted for the vendors of the land, that Sir George felt his breath taken away.

He regarded the youth with an expression of genuine admiration, and the picture of his daughter as she made her unavailing appeal last night rose to his mind's eye reproachfully, whilst somebody seemed to be whispering in his ear :

‘ Would not this young fellow—strong in body and intellect, and very fond of her—would he not make as good a match for Milly as you can find, considering that she is very fond of him ?’

He answered himself with a diplomatic evasion—for he occasionally practised upon himself—and ‘ there is time enough to think about that,’ was his mental observation. Then, aloud to Kenneth, in his most complimentary tone and manner :

‘ You are gleg at the uptake, my man,

as the saying is. Yes, you have come good speed in getting the details of the business at your finger-ends in such a brief time. That's the way to get on, Gordon. Never let the grass glint beneath your feet until you have got to a safe resting-place. I congratulate you.'

'I am glad you are pleased,' rejoined Kenneth, smiling at the unusual cordiality of his reception.

'Pleased!—I am proud of you, sir; and, satisfied as I was that you were the very man for the post, I am now convinced that it was a lucky day for all of us that I thought of you. There was a clever young engineer of Glasgow recommended to us, and, if you had positively refused to take the work in hand, he would have been appointed probably.'

Kenneth looked up quickly at this intimation, and a shade passed over his eyes.

'I hope that in accepting the post I have not thrust aside some one who may be

better qualified and more in need of the appointment than I am.'

'Never fash your head about that. If everybody was to hang back because somebody else wanted to go forward, there would be no movement at all, unless it was a partan's—backward. As for the qualification, *we* judge of that, and take the man that seems to have most of it. Moreover, there will likely be room for Leslie, too ; that's the name of the engineer.'

'I should say he will be required as soon as you have closed the bargain.'

'Then that will depend on what speed you make in your investigations on the spot; and, if you are as clever about them as you have been about the papers, we will soon be in possession or released from the negotiations. Do not spare cash; employ the cleverest experts you can discover. But mind, keep your eyes very wide open, for I will be guided more by your report than theirs.'

‘The responsibility is a heavy one, but you know that I have a motive for working which will help me to do my best.’

‘Just so, just so,’ said the knight somewhat abruptly, ‘and the best can do no more.’

When the interview closed, Kenneth believed that he was nearer to Milly than he had hoped to be until after years of hard work. He had given her father not only satisfaction, but pleasure, and the father had placed wealth within his reach; best of all, no opposition was to be made to their wishes on his return from the struggle with fortune. What did it matter, then, if Sir George did want Milly to unite herself to some one else? She would be faithful, and wait for him. The days had gone by when a maiden could be forced to accept a man at the bidding of her parent; and even if such an attempt were made, Wardlaw was too honourable a man to join in it. Force, however, was quite out of the question.

Milly's father was of too kindly a disposition, and too much attached to his daughter to think of it.

So he was buoyant with hope, and Milly exerted her utmost power of self-control in order not to dash it with any sign of the forebodings which had taken possession of her. The paleness she could not conceal, but presently she felt her cheeks flushing and burning, and her breath becoming short, as she listened to his glowing dreams of the future that had been suddenly brought near to them ; and to his enthusiastic laudations of her father's generosity and goodness.

She looked away from him in order that he might not see the doubt which darkened her eyes and made the under lip quiver slightly. The doubt was the most horrible thing which had yet disturbed the smooth current of her life ; it had haunted her during the previous day ; haunted her still more throughout the night, after she had made that appeal and learned that it could not be

granted without grievous injury to Kenneth's best and dearest interests.

The painful doubt which had entered her imagination was this—as has been already indicated—that her father was actuated by selfish and not generous motives in what he was doing. She loved him so that when the suspicion first flashed upon her, she was as much stunned with dismay as if she had been told that he had committed some heinous crime.

Whatever suspicions Kenneth had entertained had been completely dispelled by the genial manner and friendly professions of Sir George, who had in every way given proofs of confidence in him. He could not doubt that this implied a kindly feeling, which would in due time grant him a fair field for winning the hand he prized beyond all other treasures.

He felt that the sun was shining on his present and his future, and in this mood Milly had less difficulty than she had antici-

pated in concealing her anxiety. Indeed, she became infected, to some degree, with his enthusiasm, and through a rainbow of tears was able to catch a glimpse of the bright days that were in store for them. She was elevated by the sight of his gladness, and became more resigned to the temporary separation, whilst the more resolved as to her course of conduct.

When Kenneth left her he started with a light heart and a fleet foot for his foster-father's farm. He was aware that he had no near blood-relationship to Balwhap; but he had been taught to call him uncle, and he felt for him the affection of a son. As he grew up the special aptitude he possessed for mastering scientific subjects induced him to study agricultural chemistry, veterinary surgery, and forestry, with much advantage to his guardian. He had never shrunk from the humblest work of the farm. He could groom a horse, hold a plough,

and take his place in the harvest-field with anyone.

These occupations, however, were known to be of his own seeking; for it was well understood that in the time coming he would never need 'to take off his coat,' except for his own pleasure—that being the country-folks' definition of the blessed condition of those who are endowed with independent means.

Kenneth himself was far from taking this view of his position. He looked forward to a career of hard work, and, he hoped, of ultimate success. What his origin was he had been forbidden to inquire; and on the few occasions when he had been tempted to disobey the command, some vague dread of what might be the answer kept him silent. It was enough for him to know that he came of good blood; and for the rest, he had health, strong muscles, and steady nerves, as well as wit that was not accounted particularly dull. With such an inheritance,

multiplied many times in value by education, he could cleave a way in the world, and make an honoured place in it for himself.

Balwhap, it is true, was a 'warm' man. He had bits of property in various parts of the county; he had considerable sums invested on sound security, and he had a comfortable nest-egg in the bank besides. But Kenneth would have been ashamed to give one serious thought to the probable legacy his foster-father might leave him. He had fixed in his mind that the bulk of the farmer's possessions would be naturally and rightly bequeathed to his own kin, amongst whom was a pretty young cousin, the daughter of an impoverished man, who had attempted many occupations and failed in all.

So Kenneth had few expectations beyond what he could do for himself, and with the confidence of youth, he looked cheerfully towards the future.

When he first told Balwhap about the enterprise which the Knight of Dunlarig had proposed to him, it was in a somewhat dubious mood, for he had not then been tempted by *the* prize which was to crown his efforts. Balwhap looked gloomy at first, and began to roll his big silk handkerchief on his knees, twisting it occasionally as if he were wringing water out of it, and then spreading it carefully to go over the whole process again. This was always a sign that he was much disturbed.

‘Ay! it’s a fine thing; a grand thing, doubtless,’ he muttered, as if he were forced to give unwilling consent to a proposal so advantageous to his foster-son. Then he looked up with an expression of dismay that his ruddy complexion and twinkling eyes made pathetically comic, as he exclaimed—
‘Ay, man, but we’ll miss you though!’

That was the only sound of lamentation which he permitted to escape him. Thereafter he entered into the scheme with the

shrewdness for which he was distinguished in all matters of business.

‘It would be a sin for ony young man to let sic a chance go by him,’ he said at length; ‘and if it be that you are minded to try it, there can be nae objection on my part. . . Maybe I would be better pleased if you were to bide at hame, but that’s ridiculous nonsense. I’m ’shamed for’t.’

The main points of the coming change in Kenneth’s life had to be explained to grannie. She said nothing, and it was impossible to gather from her expressionless face whether or not she understood. When he arrived on this day, however, satisfied and hopeful, she watched him closely as he spoke with animation to Balwhap. The latter only interjected with an occasional ‘Ay, ay,’—‘I dare say,’—‘Like enough,’ and so on.

Grannie beckoned to Kenneth, and he advanced to her quickly; for affection, as well as custom, impelled everyone in the

house to give her prompt and willing attention. When conversing with those who were intimate, she frequently dispensed with the use of her speaking-trumpet, being able to distinguish the words by the movement of the speaker's lips.

'Well, grannie?' inquired Kenneth, as he stood before her with a pleasant smile lighting his face.

She gazed at him for some seconds before she replied: 'I want to see Mildred Kerr before you leave us.'

'I shall give her your message, and she is sure to come at once.'

'To-morrow, then; and you come with her.'

Grannie became absorbed in the Book again, and appeared to be as unconscious of all that was passing around her as the inanimate furniture.

Kenneth knew that it was fruitless to try to hold further discourse with her when she had settled herself down in this fashion;

otherwise he would have liked to tell her that if he were to bring Miss Kerr up to Balwhap, the circumstances might afford grounds for gossip which would be displeasing to Sir George.

He overcame the difficulty, however ; he despatched a messenger to Dunlarig with a note to Milly, simply intimating grannie's wish. The answer brought back was—' I shall call to-morrow forenoon.'

And when she came, Kenneth was ready to assist her out of the carriage and to pilot her into the house.

And what was it grannie wanted ? To look at the two young faces, to make their hands meet solemnly in hers, whilst she appeared to be muttering something to herself. Then she took a letter from between the leaves of the Bible, and gave it to Milly.

' Read that ; and if it be your wish, as it is mine, copy it with your own hand, and with your own hand give it to him on the day of his departure.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

LAST DAYS.

To both Kenneth and Milly the joining of their hands by grannie was more impressive than a ceremonious betrothal would have been.

It was a simple action, but it was that of a woman whose influence over the minds of others had always been extraordinary. Grannie's age was, moreover, so great that there seemed little likelihood that she would live to see Kenneth return. It seemed as though she were standing with one hand ready to raise the curtain which hides the world beyond the grave, and turning to bless with the other the union of these children whom

she loved, and bid them God-speed in their journey through life hand-in-hand.

They passed out of grannie's presence together. It was natural that Milly should feel more impressed than Kenneth did by the solemn demeanour of the dame. The various mental struggles through which she had passed since her father's return to Dunlarig with his visitors had seriously affected her nerves, and she was consequently morbidly sensitive to the influence of such a scene.

The immediate effect, however, was good, for it made her feel that Kenneth and she were now so closely drawn together that no power on earth could separate them. It was as though a voice had said, 'Peace, be still,' and a solemn calm had succeeded the storm of thoughts which had been troubling her.

All nature seemed to be in sympathy with her mood. It was one of those soft, grey days when stillness pervades the

atmosphere and a delicate haze gives an appearance of unreality to all surrounding objects—such a day as a spirit might choose to walk abroad in if wishing to revisit the world by the light of day.

It is almost always more easy for the one who goes away than for the one who stays at home to face the parting bravely. The preparations which must be made before setting out on a journey serve to distract the mind from dwelling on its sorrows.

The whole vigour of Kenneth's young manhood was aroused by the prospect of work worthy of his efforts, and which was to bring him so rich a reward. Besides, it is impossible for any youth of courage and enterprise not to feel pleasure in the thought of seeing new countries, and of testing his own power of independent action.

Kenneth had always desired to travel ; he was conscious of great physical strength and power of endurance ; and, having made up his mind to strive with all his might and

main for success, he naturally felt sanguine as to the outcome of his journey. Had he known all that had been going on in Milly's mind, he would have laughed it off, and said :

'Come, Milly, this will never do; a canter on the heather is what you want to clear away those silly cobwebs.'

The coachman had been sent on with the carriage, and told to wait a little way down the hill where the road was not so rough. There was a footpath leading through some fields to the spot, and Kenneth chose it, saying to Milly :

'This is perhaps the last time we shall be alone. I am so glad you came to-day.'

'Yes; I am glad, too, that grannie thought of this, for it will be a real good-bye, and it will be good to think of—afterwards.'

There was a little half-smothered sob before the last word, which was a sore temptation to Kenneth.

‘We are but faint-hearted lovers, Milly, to make so much of a one year’s test. Think of the heroes of romance, what prolonged trials they had to go through before they could hope to win the lady of their hearts. I wish our year of trial was over, though, Milly.’

There was a note of tender longing in Kenneth’s voice as he ended, that brought the tears into the girl’s eyes.

‘It is not the time—though that seems long to me,’ said she slowly, as if thinking aloud. ‘It is not the distance, though that is great; it is——’

‘Well?’ queried Kenneth, with a loving glance at the pale, downcast face beside him.

Milly seemed to rouse herself before she continued:

‘It was only a foolish presentiment; but now—after to-day—I know we cannot be parted.’

They reached the carriage, and Milly was driven away.

Kenneth watched the departing carriage in a far more hopeful frame of mind as to the future than he had done when he stood at the door of Craigness a few weeks before ; yet then he had had no thought of so soon going far away from Milly.

What made the difference ? He had passed out of the darkness of doubt and fear into the full light of hope.

* * * * *

The days seemed to succeed each other with the rapidity of lightning ; and as each one passed away, Milly felt more and more like a condemned criminal whose last hour was approaching. In spite of all her efforts, the clouds of foreboding gathered again as soon as she returned to the sphere of Wardlaw's influence.

Yet she was surely more to be envied than pitied—young, beautiful, rich ; with an indulgent father ; a handsome, high-spirited, and devoted lover—a luxurious

home, and almost nothing to interfere with her wishes.

The troubles of the young are very real to them while they last, and the warm life-blood makes them feel things more acutely than they are felt by those whom age has chilled. But just as Milly might have smiled at the trifles that make the bitter sorrows of a little child, so many an older woman, less fortunate in her experiences of life, would have mocked at Milly's imaginary woes.

What is it to be parted for a little time from one whom you can think of with loving joy as brave and worthy of your love, and to whose return in triumph you can look forward with tender pride? Think of the many wives and mothers who, wearily counting the years, and weeks, and days, wait for the wanderers whose return can bring them neither joy nor triumph, but only grief and shame !

Milly was not by nature a moping, fanciful girl ; and it was a great addition

to her troubles to feel that her fears were apparently so unreasonable and so ungrateful.

The last Sunday came far too quickly for the young lovers. It had been arranged that they were all to drive to Crathie and attend service at the little church there.

Wardlaw was not an ardent adherent of any denomination, but he was capable of attending church with great propriety when it suited his own purposes. It suited his own purpose to go on this occasion. When Milly expressed her astonishment to Kenneth, her peculiar manner caused him to reply laughingly :

‘ You have grown absurdly superstitious, Milly, and you think if this man, whom you appear to dread as much as if he were the old sorcerer himself, enters a church, he will disappear in flame and smoke.’

Mrs. Woodleigh was of the party, of course. She would not for worlds have

missed the opportunity of seeing Royal personages.

On their arrival at the church, they were shown to a front seat in the gallery facing the Royal pew.

Crathie church is a lowly temple for a Royal worshipper, and great must be the wonder of foreign visitors, accustomed to gorgeous ritual and magnificent cathedrals, when they see the gracious Lady who rules over England and many lands besides, sharing with her humble subjects in the simple Scottish service of prayer and praise.

Great, also, must be their astonishment when they see Her Majesty, plainly dressed in mourning garments, enter quietly with no apparent pomp of ceremonial, and take her place as any other dignified matron in the land might with some of her sons and daughters in the pew beside her.

But in thus maintaining the simple dignity of true English family life lies one

great secret of the Queen's influence over the minds and hearts of her subjects. The days have gone by (for the present, at all events) when a Queen could serve her subjects best by leading them in person to battle, or at least urging them on to victory.

But our gracious Queen has led the van in the struggle for a nobler cause than any that ever inspired the Amazons of old. For that, namely, of the preservation of the purity and dignity of family life, and of the cultivation of the nobler sympathies and affections. Secure in the possession of the goodwill of her people, Her Majesty can worship amid her subjects with no body-guard to protect her.

Yet in these days such confidence is not always justified.

It was interesting, to those who knew the circumstances, to see the Chevalier, who claimed to be the last of the direct male descendants of the Stuarts, looking on the

gracious Lady whom he considered as the usurper of his rights.

The Queen's favourite chaplain was the officiating clergyman. He chose for his text the words, 'Let not your heart be troubled.'

To Milly it seemed as if he had chosen this text with special reference to herself and Kenneth—as if theirs were the only troubled hearts in the congregation. She was listening attentively, and feeling comforted by the preacher's words, although she very frequently found herself wondering where Kenneth would be when another Sunday came, and where and when they would spend their first Sunday together after the glad home-coming.

Suddenly there was a sound as of some one falling heavily, followed by a general rustling and sensation in the congregation. The noise proceeded from the gallery behind the Queen's pew, and after some apparent confusion John Brown approached Her

Majesty, and made some communication to which his Royal Mistress replied. Quiet was soon restored, and the preacher continued.

Drummond Wardlaw was seated next to Milly, and when this incident occurred she noticed him start, and her eyes were fascinated by the extraordinary expression of triumphant malice depicted on his countenance. He was off his guard, and whilst what she saw puzzled her exceedingly as being apparently motiveless, still it tended to confirm her suspicion and fear of the man.

She heard him mutter :

‘ By Jove ! the very thing ! ’

The cause of the commotion in the church was explained afterwards by one of the officials. A man had fainted in one of the gallery pews.

But what could Mr. Drummond Wardlaw have to do with him ?

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SCARE AND ITS CAUSE.

THE fainting man was removed as quietly and with as much decorum as possible under the circumstances.

Downstairs he was kindly attended to, and on regaining consciousness stared around with an air of scared confusion. He was a plain-looking man, apparently of the artisan class, with no special characteristics in his dress or manner.

‘I am very sorry for causing a fuss,’ he said presently, and with as much penitence as if he had done something wrong, ‘but these fits have come on at times since I was a child, and without any warning. I hope you will forgive me, and I thank you

kindly. I'll go down to the inn, where I'm staying, and rest a bit. Thank you again, and good-day.'

He walked down the little hill slowly, as if he were still feeling weak, and on reaching the road turned in the direction of the homely inn which stands half-way between Ballater and Braemar, an old-fashioned place with limited accommodation, but where coaches and other vehicles travelling between the two places seldom fail to halt for the refreshment of travellers.

But, strange to say, the man did not go on to the inn ; he halted at some distance from it and looked cautiously in every direction. No one being visible, as it was the kirk hour, he took something hastily from his pocket, and flung it from him as far as he could into a field.

The something was a small revolver, and having thus got rid of it, the pale, trembling wretch seemed to breathe freely again. He stood more erect as he passed

his hand over his brow, making the sign of the cross, his lips moving the while as if repeating a prayer of thankfulness. Then he pulled his hat firmly on his head, and boldly retraced his steps.

As he was passing the church a psalm was being sung to one of those low, wailing airs common to Scotch psalmody. The man looked up for an instant, and a shudder passed over him, whilst he again made the sign of the cross and quickened his pace.

A little way beyond Abergeldie a gig was standing by the roadside, the driver lounging lazily on the heathery slope, smoking a short clay pipe. He rose on seeing the other approach. Without a word the two stepped into the gig, and drove off at full speed, which was slackened in order to drive quietly through Ballater, and increased again as soon as they got clear of the town.

Wardlaw had watched the proceedings in the kirk attentively. When he saw the man who had caused the commotion being quietly

helped out, there was a curious expression on his face—disappointment mingled with alarm. But whatever emotions he experienced, the expression passed instantly, and he sat calmly to the end of the service.

There was considerable anxiety expressed in the faces of many of the congregation, but as the principal person present retained a perfectly tranquil demeanour, the excitement soon subsided, and the service was quietly proceeded with to its close. A few members of the congregation, however, continued to look glum enough, for, having read in their weekly papers of the exploits of the Irish-Americans, they were suspiciously watchful, and each felt that his own life, as well as the Queen's, might be in danger.

When the service ended the congregation dispersed in their usual orderly fashion; but when outside the sacred building, they gathered in groups on the green knowes, and discussed the event which had dis-

turbed them. Various conjectures were hazarded as to dynamiters, Fenians, Socialists, and such like ; while some shook their heads sagely and were silent, as if they could have told all about it if they had cared to speak. Nothing more was to be learned, however, but that the man had fainted, and that no one knew anything about him.

Sir George and his party had also a good deal to say on the topic of the day as they drove back to Dunlarig. The knight himself, with his usual sagacity in such matters, was fully convinced that the man was a conspirator, and was indignant at his having been allowed to go free.

‘ At the same time,’ he said, addressing the Chevalier more particularly, ‘ this is the very last place the dastardly villains ought to choose for their attempts, if they have any consideration for their own safety ; for there are hundreds of sturdy farmers and gillies so devoted to their royal mistress,

that they would tear a man limb from limb if they suspected him guilty of designs on her life.'

The Chevalier seemed more inclined to believe that the simple explanation of the occurrence was in reality the true one.

Kenneth, with the generous disinclination of youth to believe in extraordinary crimes, was of the same opinion as the Chevalier.

Wardlaw took scarcely any part in the discussion, and Milly, who from her corner was quietly watching his countenance, observed no change take place in the expression of cool indifference which it wore. The mask was on again.

The Chevalier, however, did discover something of which he made a mental note.

The subject sufficed for the chief conversation of the party until they arrived at the Clachan of Dunlarig, when Wardlaw abruptly addressed his host.

'I should like to get down here, Sir George, to inquire for my friend Cathcart.'

‘By all means. We can wait a few minutes.’

‘On no account—rather than keep you waiting, I shall go on with you.’

‘Oh, well, as wilful man will have his way, we will take you at your word.’

The waggonette stopped and Wardlaw descended, much to the relief of one person in the group. As they drove off, Wardlaw stood for a few minutes in meditation.

‘Awkward this,’ he was saying to himself; ‘I must see this man, and then I am at his mercy. . . . No, he is at mine; and by saving his neck now, he will be a useful servant, ready, for his own sake, to do whatever he is told without being curious. He is the man I want.’

And with that he lifted his head as if satisfied upon some important point. He proceeded to the inn, where there was a considerable bustle, owing to the number of tourists who make its harvest at this season of the year.

As he entered he observed two men who, using the rights of *bonâ-fide* travellers, were drinking at the bar.

In answer to his inquiries, the waiter told him that Mr. Cathcart was not yet returned. On his way out he touched one of the men on the shoulder.

He was the same man who had fainted in the kirk, and at the touch he became pale, put down the glass he was raising to his lips, and moved back a step as if he would hide from some terror. But, apparently lacking courage to disobey the mysterious signal, he hastily swallowed the contents of his glass, told his comrade to wait, and then followed Wardlaw.

The latter walked up the hill, which was covered with firs and larches, until he reached a bare, rocky eminence sufficiently distant from the houses, whilst no one could approach within earshot without being seen. Behind the place where he halted rose a precipitous crag, so that, by turning

his back to it, he could command a view of the paths by which any eavesdropper might come to surprise him and the man he had summoned to a council of some sort.

The poor fellow advanced with reluctance and sulkily.

‘Well,’ he asked, in the growling tone of one who feels bound to submit and yet resents the necessity. ‘What do you want? I don’t know you.’

‘No, but you know by what right I have called you here, Geoghan.’

‘Well?’ repeated Geoghan, surveying his tyrant in a way suggestive of some disagreeable intention towards him.

Wardlaw was quick to interpret the look, and knew that the man was the stronger of the two. He spoke, however, with his usual coolness; he could not have been more undisturbed by the threatening look if twenty men had been there to defend him.

‘You have failed in your undertaking.’

‘Failed!—I sickened at it, and there’s

an end of it. Somebody else must be told off for the job. I won't do it, anyhow.'

'You know the consequences.'

Geoghan made a horrible grimace, and uttered a short laugh that was equally horrible in its intense bitterness.

'Right enough. There are none of us that don't know what you mean. But I'll chance it, all the same.'

'And you call yourself a patriot?'

'I did, but not of that sort, and it's no use speaking to me about it.'

'Are you a coward?'

The man stared at him, and that ugly look was in his eyes again.

'Do you think it's any coward that would be likely to say he wouldn't keep that oath of hell's own making?'

Wardlaw shrugged his shoulders, and regarded the man pityingly.

'Then I suppose you are ready to pay the forfeit to-night?'

‘What must be must,’ answered the man doggedly.

‘What would you say if I offered to show you the way out of your scrape?’

‘Say!—say that you were the biggest traitor to the cause of the two of us.’

‘So be it, we need not talk about the thing further.’

Wardlaw made a movement as if to descend the hill. For a moment Geoghan stood sulkily defiant, and then, startled by the ominous termination of their interview, knowing full well from experience the meaning of the hints, he called hastily after him :

‘I say! Look here; don’t go away. Give a fellow a chance, and tell me what you mean.’

The voice which made the appeal was a rough one, but, notwithstanding, there was something piteous in it at this moment. Wardlaw turned leisurely, as if debating with himself whether or not he would be merciful.

‘How am I to know, if I give you the chance, that you will be faithful to me?’ he asked callously.

‘Oh, saints in heaven! if it’s a fair chance, I’ll be anything you like—your dog, and fetch and carry at your nod.’

That was the voice of a drowning man clutching at a straw. Mephistopheles knew it, and smiled in his sleeve triumphantly.

‘I don’t know what you may think a fair chance, but I offer you life and work, with good wages, in return for your services as I may require them.’

‘But what kind of service is it?’ asked the poor man, hesitating as Faust hesitated to accept the devil’s bribe.

‘I always understood that beggars had no right to be choosers,’ was the cruel answer. ‘I will protect you from—those you know, and you must take my word for the fulfilment of my promise.’

‘Will you help me to slip out of the country?’

‘What would be the use of that, when there is no corner of the earth where they would not find you?’

‘There are them that would help and protect me if I turned.’

‘Hush!’ interrupted Wardlaw sternly. ‘Remember Carey.’

‘Holy Mother, be merciful! Then I must take your offer. And who, if you please, is my master?’

‘The devil,’ was the reply, with a laugh.

Geoghan started, as if for a moment he fancied that it might really be the eminent person mentioned to whom he was engaging himself.

‘I see, sir, you like your joke,’ he said, recovering himself presently, and with a sorry attempt at a smile. ‘But what name am I to call my master?’

‘Jones—Davy Jones will do for the present,’ replied the mysterious one, as he proceeded to write on a leaf of his pocket-book; and then continued: ‘Take this to

the person named, in Aberdeen ; and keep in close hiding till you see me again. Don't go back to the inn—leave your comrade to take care of himself, and you walk as fast as you can to the city. Here is something to help you on your way.'

The man promised obedience, and Wardlaw made his way to Dunlarig.

CHAPTER XXV.

‘OFF!’

KENNETH GORDON had never known what it was to find time hang heavy on his hands. Always busy with half-a-dozen irons in the fire at once, the day was too short for him, and therefore he frequently used a great part of the night. But the rapidity with which time had flown between the date of his acceptance of Sir George Kerr’s proposal and that of his departure made him think that time had not merely flown, but had been annihilated.

Yet many things happened in the interval—many things which he afterwards recalled, some with pleasure, some with pain, and some with indignation. The day of

departure came upon him as a surprise, and the leave-takings were so hurried that for the hour the sting of them was sheathed, like a cat's claws, which touch the cheek as softly as velvet, and presently dart forth to scratch.

Milly's last words to him, spoken through tears which she tried to cover with a smile, were :

'Do not trust that man—do not use the introductions he has given you, and always remember the talisman which grannie and I have given you. Good-bye.'

'I have it here safe,' he answered, touching his breast-pocket. 'You have told me not to open it until I am on board ; but the first thing I do when my foot touches the deck of the *Devonia* will be to open the packet and learn what charm you two have contrived to weave around me.'

That was spoken quite bravely ; but as he began another sentence with 'So—' he suddenly stopped. Then there was a

hurried embrace, and a husky voice breathed the words :

‘God bless you, my lass, and keep you safe till I come back.’

Another husky voice, but softer, whispered in answer :

‘God bless you, Kenneth ; and whatever happens—*trust me.*’

It was over in a moment, and he was out of the room. She was sitting down, her hands covering her face, and sobbing. And through the sobs some sweet voice was murmuring musically in her brain—‘He will come back, he will come back ; he will be true.’

Sir George said cheerfully : ‘Good-bye, Gordon. You have your instructions all right, and your code of telegraph signals, which will amuse you on the passage. Good-luck to you.’

Old Craigness merely told him to take care of himself, and see that he did his

best to 'mak' the job *pay*.' But in any difficulty he was to write to him.

Wardlaw, in his quiet way, wished him success, and told him that the gentlemen to whom he gave him introductions would be of the greatest service in affording him any information he might require. The Chevalier, in his stately way, gave him much practical advice for his guidance in travelling, and concluded with a peculiar significance of tone and look:

'Above all, be *very* careful of forming hasty friendships with strangers. There may be more in this caution than you think.'

At last he was at Aberdeen Station with Balwhap by his side talking loud, with an unconscious desire to cloak his own feelings. The baggage had been despatched two days before, so that Kenneth was encumbered with nothing more than a portmanteau. He had, therefore, leisure to give all his last attentions to his warm-hearted guardian.

But whilst walking up and down the

platform he could not help observing a rough-looking, sturdy fellow, dressed in brown corduroy, holding a bundle in one hand, a thick staff in the other, and having a heavy frieze overcoat on his arm. He was sitting on one of the forms, his head bent on his staff, and looking the picture of despair.

‘That poor beggar has come to grief somehow,’ said Kenneth to his companion.

‘Out o’ wark, I daursay, or maybe been on the spree and wasted a’ his siller,’ was the practical comment of shrewd Balwhap after eyeing the man for an instant.

‘Wish we could help him, though ; it would be a pleasant thing as a parting gift to my home to lift some poor chap out of trouble.’

‘Hoots, bairn ! we canna help a’body. Folk maun help themselves, or we would a’ gang to the dowgs.’

This was spoken in no uncharitableness,

for, as Kenneth knew, Balwhap never saw want or sorrow without trying to relieve it, only he had a morbid dislike to be thought 'soft.' This was presently apparent.

'Bide you there till I speir at yon birkie what ails him,' said the farmer in an uncomfortable way, by which he tried to make it clear that he was quite indifferent.

He spoke to the man and immediately returned to Kenneth, who could see by the sparkling of his eyes that 'his birse was up.'

'He's a dour deevil yon. We needna fash about him.'

The train was ready, and Kenneth took his seat. The farmer stood at the door of the carriage, plucking hairs from his grey whiskers and chewing the ends of them in a fidgety way. When the guard gave the signal for starting, he grasped Kenneth's hand nervously.

'Noo, mind—you are to be ready to start for hame at a minute's notice, nae matter fat stands in the way. . . . Lord

keep ye ! My sang !—but it'll be ill doing without you.'

The two hands were clasped tightly till the movement of the train compelled them to part, but Kenneth saw the grey blue eyes glistening with a moisture which Balwhap would have said was 'just owing to the way o' the wind.'

The train was off, and during the journey to Glasgow Kenneth felt the first sharp prickings of the hitherto sheathed sting of parting from home and all he loved most.

A comfortable cabin berth had been secured for him on board the Anchor Line mail steamer *Devonia* (and the comptrollers of this line, by the way, show their indifference to an ancient superstition of seamen by starting their vessels on Friday. Kenneth did not care what the day might be). As soon as he reached the deck he fulfilled his promise to Milly.

He took out the precious packet and opened it. It contained simply a locket of

steel, bearing outside the legend—‘*Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*’ Inside there was a tiny band of hair which he knew to be Milly’s.

You who read this have been in love or will be ; therefore you do or will understand what might seem the foolish sentimentality of the youth. He put that locket to his lips, and felt that it was to him as truly a talisman against all evil as the Lee-penny itself or any other charm which history or fable has made us acquainted with. This was to him a treasure beyond price, and its possession gave him new courage and strength to encounter whatever difficulties there might be in his way—ay, and power to overcome them.

All the interest and curiosity which a healthy youth feels on finding himself on board a great ocean steamer for the first time prompted him to rove from one end of the vessel to the other, examining everything, inquiring about everything, and

taking pleasure in everything. He became a favourite of the captain and mates at an early stage of the passage, and the engineers were delighted with this robust young fellow, who knew so much of the theory of their craft. They let him see the practical working of all he had learned.

With his fellow-passengers too he was popular, for, being well accustomed to the rough seas on the Aberdeenshire coast, he knew nothing of sea-sickness, and was therefore able to render assistance to those who suffered from it, whether they belonged to the cabin or to the steerage. He did not recognise any other difference between the two classes than that the one was able to pay more for accommodation than the other.

The first day out from Merville he was surprised to see on the steerage deck the man he had observed at the Aberdeen Station, sitting in exactly the same miserable attitude, minus the bundle, but with the

frieze overcoat now buttoned closely upon him.

His heart warmed to anybody or anything which was in the remotest degree associated with home, and he could not resist the desire to speak to him.

‘Why, friend, you come from my part of the world. How is it I have not seen you on deck before?’

The man lifted a dark, woebegone countenance, and answered humbly :

‘This is the first day I have been able to get out of my berth, sir. I remember seeing you at Aberdeen, but I did not like to speak.’

‘Are you ill? Can I help you?’

‘I don’t know,’ was the gloomy reply. ‘I have had such a long run of bad luck that I doubt if anybody can help me.’

‘Going to some friends in the States, perhaps?’

‘I have no friends anywhere. I am

going to seek work in the hope of bettering myself, as the saying is.’

And the man laughed hoarsely.

Kenneth paused for a moment. Then—

‘You want work? What can you do?’

‘Anything that willing hands can do.’

‘What have you been?’

‘A navvy, a stoker, and a field-labourer.’

‘Oh! And what’s your name?’

‘Tom Davis, at your service, sir.’

Kenneth paused again, and vaguely the Chevalier’s warning recurred to him. But the generosity of youth prevailed.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I am going to a place where I shall want workmen such as you, and maybe I shall be able to help you.’

‘That’s kindly spoken, sir, and you’ll find me a willing hand at anything.’

‘All right. I’ll think about it, and let you know what I can do.’

‘Thank you, sir, you have made me feel a bit brighter than I have done for many a day.’

CHAPTER XXVI.

A HARD STRUGGLE.

MILLY did not say to herself in precise terms—‘ Now that the parting is over, I must guide my present conduct by my hope of what the future is to bring to me.’ But it was by the spirit of this idea that she proceeded to regulate the course of her conduct.

There are many tones in the gamut of the word ‘ parting,’ and although all contain the note of pain, they have also the higher note of ‘ hope,’ or men and women could not live. The fisherman’s wife mends the nets and prepares the bait, and does not think of the storm and wreck, but of the coming harvest of the sea. The soldier’s

wife buckles on the sword of her loved one, and, although there may be tears in her eyes and fear in her heart, she thinks of the brave things he will do in the fight, and of his coming back crowned with glory.

Whatever the adventure upon which those dearest to us may be bound, the thought of the triumphant return makes the cheeks glow and the eyes flash ; the peril is mercifully clouded, whilst the halo of the home-coming dazzles them.

So with the men themselves ; it does not do to think of failure—those succeed who think only of success.

Milly's would have been the most patient of home-staying hearts, if she had not been troubled by doubts of her father's projects, which were heightened by the insinuations of Mrs. Woodleigh.

That honest woman was perpetually, and, of course, in the most good-natured way, referring to Mr. Wardlaw as one of the noblest, handsomest men she had ever come

across ; and suggesting, quite incidentally, that he seemed to be pining for one encouraging smile from the daughter of ' dear Sir George.' And then !—what a magnificent future he had before him ! Just think of it !

An earldom !—and such an ancient earldom as that of Benvoir ! And his lady would be a Countess. There ! to be presented at Court, and have all the honours attendant thereupon. What more could the heart of any woman who had a grain of spirit desire ?

And so on ; always in a very soft voice, and a sympathizing yet half-envious manner, as if she were wishing that such dignities might have come her way. The envy, however, was only intended as spice to the suggestion that Milly should at once accept the good fortune which was thrown at her feet.

The opinions and sayings of Mrs. Woodleigh on most subjects had long ceased to

have any weight with Milly. Her girlish quickness of perception had made her aware of the shallowness and vanity of the woman. At the same time, love for her father, and the desire to please him, prevented her from being deficient in courtesy to a lady whom he had chosen as her companion.

Although Milly had never attempted to analyze her feelings in regard to Mrs. Woodleigh, they might be described as those of restrained contempt. She might, therefore, have continued to listen patiently to the good lady's panegyrics of Wardlaw, but that she could not help supposing that, like the opinions of a Government newspaper, they were in some way inspired by Sir George himself. For she had no suspicion that Mrs. Woodleigh could have any personal interest in the matter.

One morning about a fortnight after Kenneth's departure, Milly, finding herself as usual ready long before the others, called Ossian and set out for Cairndhu. At first

the invigorating caresses of the morning air and the gambols of her companion kept her from thinking ; but, by-and-by, as the dog became interested in his own pursuits, she began to climb the path more slowly, and her thoughts went back to the night when she had gone to meet Kenneth at the cairn.

And now he was so far away ! He had sent her a letter from Moville, and it was very precious to her. But a letter was a poor substitute for his presence. There seemed to be a feeling of emptiness in the air, and her heart cried out after her love as the bird cries for its mate.

But when she stood where she had stood with him, and gazing down saw the mist slowly rising from the hills and glens around, while here and there an opening revealed a green oasis framed in white vapour, and when the rays of the sun suddenly piercing the haze made the dewdrops sparkle like diamonds on the lovers' monument beside her, the beauty of the scene which she had

so often looked upon softened and comforted her heart. She accepted it as a good omen that the clouds would rise from their lives, and in the light of their happiness every little event would have a brightness of its own.

Taking out her letter she read it again. Then, with her heart full of Kenneth, and rejoicing in the thought that he too must be thinking of her, she turned homewards.

On entering the morning-room Milly found that the Chevalier and Wardlaw had breakfasted unusually early, and were about to take advantage of the beautiful weather to have a day's shooting.

Sir George's manner to his daughter was growing more peculiar every day. He spoke to her on several occasions with a peevishness which she had never noticed in him before, and when alone with her he talked in a forced, uncomfortable manner, fidgeted about the room, seemed always on the point of

saying something which he did not say, and usually left the room abruptly, as if he were glad to put an end to such unsatisfactory conversations.

His conduct to others meanwhile was unchanged, and his manners as suave and complacent as ever. Naturally this marked change in her relations with the father whom she loved so much was the cause of considerable pain and surprise to his daughter.

On the present occasion he inquired with vexation in his tone why she had not been present at breakfast.

The flush on her cheek deepened, but she answered brightly :

‘ Papa dear, you must forgive me. I could not guess that you were all going to turn over a new leaf this morning.’

The Chevalier came gallantly to her defence, saying :

‘ We ought all to thank Miss Kerr, for she has been to the fresh fountain of youth

and beauty, and is now sharing with us the gifts she has brought thence.'

Wardlaw placed a chair for her, and took occasion to say in a low voice :

'I should have liked to share your walk to Cairndhu. May I not be with you some morning ?'

In the constrained unnatural voice in which she almost always addressed Wardlaw, Milly replied :

'Ossian and I are early risers. We do not care for other companions in our rambles.'

Looking across the table Milly saw the Chevalier's eyes fixed upon her, as they had been many times recently, with a half-pitying, half-questioning expression. She could not understand it, and yet, for some reason, she was comforted by it, and felt that the Chevalier was a true friend, and that she could trust him.

When the gentlemen left the room the Chevalier turned to Wardlaw, saying in an apologetic tone :

‘I had forgotten. There is a letter of some importance which I should like to write before starting. If you return to the breakfast-room you will not soon lose patience, even if I keep you waiting for some time.’

The Comte de Blanc proceeded to his room, but Wardlaw, instead of following his advice, turned to his host.

‘I have something which I particularly wish to say to you, Sir George.’

‘Let us go to the smoking-room, then. Have you had any news of importance?’

‘No. But it is not that matter about which I wished to speak to you. It is about —Miss Kerr. I need not assure you, Sir George, that your good opinion of me, as shown in your readiness to permit me to try to win your daughter, is of great value to me. But I am now convinced that my cause is hopeless. I am, therefore, resolved that it is better for me to go away.’

Sir George was taken aback by this

declaration. His mind was as much fixed on this match for his daughter as ever it had been ; but he had felt reluctant to press it on her. The strange manner which she had noticed in him was due to his desire to urge her to yield to his wishes, and the uncomfortable prickings of conscience which assailed him whenever he was about to carry out his purpose.

As Wardlaw had foreseen, however, the announcement of the intended withdrawal of this noble suitor only roused Sir George to action.

‘ My dear fellow,’ he said, ‘ you must not think of such a thing. My daughter is young, and we must not be too hasty with her. But it is impossible for her not to appreciate the merits and accomplishments of such a man as you are. Give her a little time and all will go as we both wish.’

Wardlaw hesitated, and then said :

‘ Well, Sir George, I yield to your wishes. But I protest at the same time against any

forcing of the young lady's inclinations. In fact, I feel as if the position were becoming a humiliating one for me, in spite of the high estimation in which I hold your daughter.'

'Nonsense, my friend! no man wants his bride to be too easily won. You will forget all this in a week or two, when the child consents to know her own mind, and you are as happy as king and queen.'

Wardlaw seemed to yield gracefully to Sir George's jovial confidence, and they went out together in the most friendly manner to inspect the guns and await the Chevalier.

When Mrs. Woodleigh and Milly were left alone, the former opened fire as usual by dwelling on the loss Milly had sustained in not having heard Mr. Wardlaw's brilliant account of some of his experiences in foreign cities.

'He seems to have been everywhere and to have known everyone of note,' she con-

tinued. 'To gain the admiration of such a man as that is something for any woman to be proud of, for he has seen so much and must have known so many beautiful and charming women, that it means something quite different from a country bumpkin's ignorant devotion.'

For once Milly was roused to a protest.

'Mrs. Woodleigh, I had rather not discuss Mr. Wardlaw with you. He is my father's guest, and therefore I owe him respect. As to what you said just now, I do not understand it altogether; but I think an honest man's love is better than oceans of admiration, and a man does not need to travel round the world in order to learn how to love truly and with all his heart.'

This was spoken with so much animation that Mrs. Woodleigh thought it wise to change the subject of conversation.

Just as Milly was rising from table a message was brought to her.

'If you please, miss, Sir George is in the

library, and would like you to go to him there.'

Milly did not comply with her father's mandate so blithely as she would have done a month or two before. She felt apprehensive of what might happen at this interview to which she was so formally summoned. Truth to tell, Sir George himself did not look forward to it with pleasurable feelings. But he had to a certain extent pledged himself to Wardlaw, and he made haste to summon his daughter lest his courage should ooze away as it had done several times lately, when he had fully intended to talk seriously to her.

The fact was that an uncomfortable idea was gradually taking shape in the diplomatist's mind—that he was afraid of his own daughter, and that all his skill in managing delicate matters and turning people round his little finger availed him nothing when opposed to her simple, straightforward strength of purpose. Of course, he did not

confess this to himself; but the idea was nevertheless gaining ground in his mind.

When Milly came he drew her into his arms, kissed her solemnly, and then said :

‘ My child, I am going to speak to you very seriously to-day on a subject which will influence your whole life. Had your mother been alive, she would have spoken to you ; but I must take her place. You understand that I feel very desirous of seeing you settled in a home of your own, with a husband to care for you, in case that I should be taken away.’

Milly interrupted anxiously :

‘ What do you mean, papa ? You are not ill, surely ?’

‘ No, dear, I am not ill ; but things happen very suddenly sometimes, you know ; and then there is no one among our relations to whom I could entrust you. So my mind would be much more at ease if your future were settled. Now, there is a

man in whom I have perfect confidence, as one of the highest honour, to whom I could give you away, if not with a glad heart, at least with the consciousness that your happiness was secured.'

Milly's heart beat fast for a moment, and her cheek flushed with the hope that her father would end her doubt and trouble, and fill her with joy by saying that this man was Kenneth; but as he proceeded the light died from her eyes, and the flush from her cheek.

'This man already has, or will have by-and-by, all that I desire in the future husband of my daughter—good looks, exceptional talents, high rank, and considerable property.'

Sir George waited for some sign of curiosity or appreciation; but Milly remained silent. He drew her to him again, and continued coaxingly :

'What says my little girl? Will she make her father proud and happy by listen-

ing favourably to what Mr. Drummond Wardlaw wishes to say to her?’

Thus appealed to, Milly answered in a low voice, without raising her eyes :

‘Papa, if you love me, you will send Mr. Wardlaw away. I cannot do what you ask me.’

‘Milly,’ said her father severely, ‘you must not behave like a child. Mr. Drummond Wardlaw has made a formal proposal to me for your hand ; but he must be assured of your willingness. Think well, foolish girl, before you reject a person of his expectations. He is not a man to be trifled with.’

Suddenly drawing herself from her father’s arms, Milly looked at him quietly and reproachfully, as, with heightened colour, she said :

‘Then tell Mr. Drummond Wardlaw that I will never marry him—never—never—never !’

With that she left the room hastily, and

crossing the hall, ran up against Miss Pittendrie, who, thinking in her kind old heart that Milly must need a loving word of sympathy now Kenneth was gone, had come over to see how things were faring with her.

Milly exclaimed :

‘ You dear, good Babbie ! I am so glad to see you. Come up to my room.’ Half-dragging the old lady along much faster than she was used to travel, Milly did not stop till they were snugly closeted in her own apartment. There she put her head on Mistress Babbie’s shoulder and gave way to a fit of sobbing.

‘ Whisht, whisht, my bairn ! What ails you ? You’re no yoursel’ ava the day,’ said Mistress Babbie, patting her on the back as if she were still a baby.

Milly soon recovered ; and, wiping her eyes, tried to make up to her old friend for the strange reception she had given her.

‘ Sit you down now, wise-like, and tell me what all the to-do is about.’

Accordingly Milly told Miss Pittendriech how Sir George’s mind was set upon this marriage with Wardlaw, and what misery it was causing her to have to displease him ; also how she feared the man, and distrusted his intentions towards her father.

Mistress Babbie listened to it all, shaking her head every now and then, raising her hands, and ejaculating, ‘ Guid sakes ! Puir lassie ! Hech, sirs !’ and so on. When the story was ended she said :

‘ It was a very good thing I came over to-day, for they would soon hae worried the life out o’ you atween them. But dinna you be feared. Craigie sees farer nor maist fowk, and he said to me afore I came away, “ Tell missy that her father will find out soon enough what Wardlaw is, and that if he does not find out I will know how to make him see the man in his true colours.” ’

When Mistress Babbie left her in the

afternoon, Milly felt refreshed and comforted.

The same post which had brought Kenneth's letter to Milly had brought a letter with the same postmark to Wardlaw, the contents of which were as follows :

‘ On board *Devonia*.

‘ All right. Your man is under my eye.

‘ TOM DAVIS.’

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DUEL IN JEST.

THAT rough scrawl—the letters big and badly formed, but firmly drawn as if by a crowbar rather than a pen—afforded Wardlaw much private gratification. He took the pleasure of an artist in the neatness of his plan and the thoroughness with which it was being carried out.

He had gauged the character of Sir George with considerable accuracy. The good man had certainly displayed commendable shrewdness in business, but in adopting the character of the ‘wily diplomatist,’ resolved to raise his family to a high place in the ranks of the aristocracy, his vanity blinded him to the real extent of his own

capacity, and he was as easily led by the nose as asses (sometimes) are.

Mrs. Woodleigh might have made a conquest of him had she not come into his household before the full development of the aristocratic mania ; as it was, she sometimes exercised a *spécial*, and generally a considerable, influence over him.

But Wardlaw had appeared when the mania had entire possession of the worthy knight, and knew exactly how to manage him, even when he was most restive. The modest man of high birth who, with a due sense of his own dignity, still shrank from pressing his attentions on the unwilling ears of the daughter of even a mere knight of commerce, was the character in which he chose to present himself to Sir George.

It must be owned that he had succeeded perfectly in keeping his host on tenter-hooks.

‘ I ought to have a diploma for donkey-training,’ was his mental sneer when he saw

how deeply the proprietor of Dunlarig had been moved by his announcement of the morning that he purposed giving up the chase of the beautiful lady and taking himself off.

He also perceived the powerful effect produced by his reluctant yielding to the request that he should remain and prosecute his suit as originally intended. The knight felt that here again was proof of the power he possessed of bending people good-naturedly to his own will.

Poor Sir George ! He had no suspicion that we are the greatest fools when we think ourselves most cunning.

But in this bold game of speculation Wardlaw was playing there was an element which he had of late somewhat overlooked. He had taken up the cause of the Chevalier on account of the importance which he was aware it would give him in the eyes of such a man as Sir George, and for some other reason which for the present he kept

might be better to say a day of waterfalls, for the dull, grey, broad sheets descended like a heavy and overpowering mass, illuminated by flashes of forked lightning, whilst peals of thunder echoed through the glens with a rumbling boom, as if the mountains were engaged in furious battle.

No one thought of quitting the house. Sir George was engaged on confidential business with his chief clerk from Aberdeen; Milly had gone to her own room, and Mrs. Woodleigh was on household cares intent.

The Chevalier and Wardlaw were left alone together. The former spoke.

‘This is the kind of day on which I find myself fit for nothing—out of sorts, restless, and unable to concentrate my thoughts so that I might go on with my task. I suppose it is the electricity in the atmosphere, and yet I am too restless to remain inactive.’

‘I am not such a sensitive subject as

you are,' replied Wardlaw carelessly. 'On a day like this I smoke, read, and try to forget that I am a prisoner, or only remember that I am a prisoner by choice. Should it please me to go out, a thorough soaking is the worst evil I have to dread; and that is easily remedied by brisk movement, a bath, and immediate change of clothing on my return.'

'Ah, you know nothing yet of rheumatism and sciatica,' rejoined the Chevalier, shrugging his shoulders.

'Well, suppose we try my milder plan. Come and have a smoke and chat.'

'Suppose we first try my plan as a diversion. You know something of fence—at least, so you have given me to understand?'

'I have taken lessons from Spaglietti, and he reckoned me amongst his expert pupils with the sword.'

'Well, there are foils in the hall. Shall we have a bout with them? It will keep

us in good humour, and our blood in circulation.'

'If it will amuse you, certainly,' said Wardlaw, unable to refrain from a smile at the idea that a man of the Chevalier's years should select such a form of amusement.

'It will afford me much pleasure to try issues, even in jest, with so distinguished a pupil of Spaglietti,' was the somewhat severely polite rejoinder.

'At your service, then.'

They went into the hall and took down the foils.

Old as he was, there was an ease and grace in the Chevalier's movements as he performed with precision the preliminary courtesies, and placed himself in position, which Wardlaw, with all the advantage of youth on his side, could not equal.

'As you will understand, I am somewhat out of practice,' observed the Chevalier, bowing apologetically; 'but I used to be

vain of my skill in fence long ago, and used even to imagine that there might come a day when it would be of service to me. . . . Bah, let that pass. I want to discover how much I have forgotten.'

'There are some new things in the art which may displease you,' said Wardlaw, still regarding the whole proceedings as an almost painful exhibition of an old man's vanity.

'Yes; if the eye fails. But we shall see; and before we begin, let me tell you precisely what I purpose doing. First, I shall touch you on the right arm, second, on the left, and third, on the breast, before you have gained a single point against me.'

'Oh, you give me too great odds!' exclaimed Wardlaw, laughing outright at the old man's ridiculous vanity.

'We shall see. Begin, please.'

The weapons and eyes met; a few swift passes and the Chevalier made his points in

the precise order which he had indicated, whilst he himself remained untouched. He bowed and smiled with pleasure, but not offensively.

‘I cannot conceal my satisfaction in finding that the old school can hold its own fairly well with the new. Will you take your revenge?’

Wardlaw hesitated; he was chagrined, but discretion and some gleam of frankness prevailed, and he could not endure a second humiliation.

‘It is unnecessary, Chevalier; I own you my master with foil and rapier. But if it was a cutlass now, or a broadsword——’

‘Aha! the claymore!’ exclaimed the Chevalier, his eyes flashing as he turned nimbly to where hung, crosswise, two trusty claymores, which had been the property of the former laird of Dunlarig.

Wardlaw was no longer inclined to be supercilious or to regard as ridiculous the Chevalier’s choice of amusement, and in

the latter's eyes, heightened colour, and sudden access of energy, there was something to make him pause upon the question—'Was this jest or earnest?'

It was with the spirit of a youth who has attained some long-sought prize that the Chevalier took down the weapons, handed one to his antagonist, unsheathed the other, and inspected it from hilt to point with a kind of reverent admiration.

'The claymore is the weapon for men of action,' he said, whilst he balanced the sword, tested its elasticity, and handled it with the interest of a practical connoisseur. 'Rapiers and foils are excellent things to play with, but this—this is for real work.'

He made swift cuts, thrusts, parries, and passes in the air, as if he were cleaving his way through a troop of foemen.

'I hope you do not mean to turn our game into real work,' observed Wardlaw carelessly, but respectfully, as he slowly examined his weapon.

‘No, no, what nonsense to think of it,’ was the response, in a tone of gleeful excitement; ‘but the sight and touch of a claymore reminds me of so many brilliant days, and of some, too, that were dark enough, heaven knows. I cannot help the stirring of my blood, the quickening of my pulse, and the eager ambition to find a worthy use for it.’

Wardlaw coolly resheathed his weapon, and placed it on a side table.

‘You will have no chance of testing your skill to-day, Chevalier; this thing is broken at the hilt. A mere tap would knock the blade off. You cannot expect a man to go into battle with a broken sword if he can retreat honourably.’

The Chevalier was disappointed, and looked slowly round to see if there might be a substitute for the broken weapon amongst the armour on the walls, but there was none. Wardlaw had spoken laughingly, but he was not ill pleased that the

trial at arms should stop here without discredit to him.

‘Besides,’ he was internally saying, ‘who knows what harm the old fool might do, or force me to do in his present excited humour?’

He was not to escape without further humiliation. Suddenly the Chevalier’s face lighted up again in pleasant anticipation of more sport.

‘I have it. There are some good pistols in the gunroom; we shall go out and try a shot at twenty paces, or ten paces as you may prefer, at some mark we can pin to a tree in the avenue.’

‘What!—in this weather?’

‘The weather has nothing to do with it—a good shot ought always to be able to calculate his aim in accordance with the wind and the rain.’

‘You are in a most bloodthirsty humour to-day, Chevalier. I have no doubt that with every pass, thrust, and cut you have

made you fancied that an enemy lay at your feet ; and now you are going out to shoot another imaginary foe, whilst you forget the rheumatics and sciatica you were talking about.'

'My desire is only to have a little practice,' said the Chevalier gravely, 'in order to assure myself that if a real enemy should appear, I shall be able to deal with him.'

'As you will, then.'

The pistols were procured, and carefully loaded. Wardlaw put on a waterproof overcoat with as much punctilious attention to its arrangement as if he had been going to make a call. The Chevalier threw a plaid of the Stuart tartan round his shoulders, the pistol case held safely under it, and they went out to the avenue. There the close arch of trees broke the fall of the rain, and although it darkened the place where they halted, still left them light enough for their amusement.

‘What sort of a mark can we fire at here?’ asked Wardlaw, unable to hide his impatience, and wondering where this foolery was to end.

‘Patience, my brave antagonist, patience, and you shall see,’ answered the Chevalier gaily, as he proceeded to knock a nail into a slim fir.

He had come prepared with the necessary implements, and, having got the nail properly fixed, he took a bright shilling from his pocket. Round this he tied a piece of white thread, looped at the end, and hung it on the nail.

‘There,’ he said blithely; ‘that is our target. Take your place at any distance you like, and fire. You shall have two shots; I ask one.’

‘In that case no more than one will be required by me,’ retorted Wardlaw, irritated by the condescension extended to him.

He took up a position and fired, but

with such hasty indifference that the ball went wide of the mark.

‘You must try again, Wardlaw—that shot cannot be allowed to count,’ said the Chevalier smoothly.

After a little persuasion, and on condition that the Comte should also take two shots, Wardlaw fired again. This time he took deliberate aim, and the bullet grazed the edge of the white disc.

‘Enough to kill my man, at any rate,’ was his mental self-congratulation, as he gave place to his companion, whose movements he watched with curiosity.

The effect of the Chevalier’s first bullet was to imbed the shilling in the bark of the tree; the second broadened one side of the silver piece.

Wardlaw was silent for a minute as he went to the improvised target and examined it closely. Then he spoke.

‘How many times could you do that out of six shots?’

‘At this distance I should expect to do it five times; but I would not pledge myself to that number on such a day as this.’

‘You must have kept yourself in particularly good practice, Chevalier. If it could happen that we had to meet in the field, and you had the choice of weapons, I should order my coffin before keeping the appointment.’

‘I trust there will be no occasion for you to order your coffin on my account.’ He was arranging the pistols in the case, which he again tucked under his plaid. ‘But, you know, there are some insults for which there is no legal remedy. The old-fashioned way of obtaining satisfaction in such a case was by the use of sword or pistol; our modern way is to use a cane or horsewhip, and I think I could manage to apply one or the other effectively to the back of an offender.’

‘You have displayed so much adroitness to-day that I have no doubt you would be

successful in the use of any weapon,' commented Wardlaw drily.

They were walking towards the house, and the downpour of rain having considerably abated, they were not hurrying.

'Yes, I dare say,' continued the Chevalier meditatively; 'and there are some cases in which I should be tempted to try a shot—in fair field, of course. As, for instance, if I happened to see a man taking advantage of circumstances to harass an innocent, pure-hearted woman. The bullet seems to me the best thing for dealing with such a person. Don't you think so?'

The speaker looked straight in Wardlaw's face as he asked the question significantly. The person addressed understood perfectly well what was meant, but concealed his annoyance under an air of languid indifference.

'I am really unable to form an opinion on the subject. . . . Are you coming into the smoking-room?'

‘Not till after luncheon, thank you. I feel better now, and will see what I can do amongst my papers.’

The Chevalier enjoyed the agreeable sensation of having done a good morning’s work in spite of the rain. He had taught this gentleman that he was not one to be trifled with ; and he had given him a warning which might be of advantage to Miss Kerr.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MODEL LOVER.

WARDLAW had the smoking-room to himself, and as the clouds rose from his cigar he saw in them certain complications in his affairs, which were not agreeable.

‘This old duffer suspects something,’ he was saying to himself; ‘how much, or what, it is impossible to tell. He is sleek and soft-tongued, but he is capable of being troublesome. . . . He evidently means to stand by the ‘girl, and if he takes it into his head to play the advocate for her with the father, there is no telling what might be the result—she might get her own way! Ah, we must put a stop to that little game. The trump card is in my hand.’

He smiled, remembering the note signed 'Tom Davis'; at the same time he resolved upon taking a decisive step with the girl herself.

Milly had been instinctively afraid of that decisive step, and had, therefore, used every precaution against being alone with him. But the precautions had succeeded only because the time had not yet come for him to oppose them. The time had come now, and with the assistance of Mrs. Woodleigh he had no difficulty in finding the opportunity he desired to speak to her in private with little probability of any interruption.

Whether inspired by caprice, or the desire to avoid unwelcome company, the hours and the directions of Milly's pedestrian exercises were of late so varied that no one could guess when she might be going out or where she might be going to, although it was known that Cairndhu continued to be her favourite resort.

Formerly the domestics would hear her call-whistle sounding for Ossian, and then would see the two starting forth in blithe companionship, the dog gambolling with wild joy round about her, or walking with contented docility by her side if so commanded. Now, no whistle was heard, but Ossian, apparently comprehending the humour of his mistress, was always on the watch for her, and in attendance at whatever hour she happened to be inclined for a ramble up the mountains or through the woods and glens.

On the morning after the day of rain the sun rose with new strength, clearing the mists away from the mountain tops, and making the swollen Dee and the babbling rivulets glisten and dance as with laughter at the gloom of the preceding day. The sun called Milly and Ossian out, and they started at a brisk pace in the direction of the Muir of Dinnet.

When little more than a mile from home,

Milly became aware that some one was following with quick steps, and would speedily overtake her. It was not unusual for her to meet or be overtaken by people of various degrees, from the shepherd or the gamekeeper up to the laird, and a kindly salutation or a brief 'crack' about the weather enlivened the meeting. But by instinct she was made conscious that the person who followed was the one she had least desire to encounter; and she was not surprised when she heard Drummond Wardlaw's voice.

'Good morning, Miss Kerr. Fortune has favoured me for once by enabling me to find you in your lonely wanderings.'

She could not do otherwise than return a civil 'Good morning, Mr. Wardlaw'; for without being deliberately rude, or bringing upon herself the declaration which she did not want to hear, she could not display any consciousness of his purpose or too plainly indicate her dislike.

‘Whither away are you and Ossian bound to-day?’ he continued, with a respectful gaiety.

‘We were intending to go as far as the Vat burn,’ she replied, with a degree of reserve which she in vain endeavoured to modify.

‘Oh, that is the place where there is a big barrel scooped in the rock with a stream of water perpetually on tap. What a capital shrine it would be for the Blue Ribbon folk. You must let me go with you.’

‘In that case you will go back to Dunlarig, for we have changed our minds, and do not mean to go so far as the Vat to-day.’

She called Ossian, and turned to retrace her steps. Wardlaw also turned, and for some distance they walked side by side in silence. At length he spoke, quietly, and with a firmness suggestive equally of self-respect and respect for her, which made its impression upon the listener.

‘ I am sorry to have spoiled your walk, Miss Kerr, but I had no suspicion that my presence was so—was likely to have such an effect. Forgive me. I own frankly that I was watching and waiting for you, as I have done many times, but dared not speak. To-day I did hope you would not refuse me the pleasure of being your attendant, and—and I am sorry to find that I have caused you annoyance, when the whole desire of my life is to give you pleasure.’

He had faltered several times in his speech ; his tone was earnest, his eyes bent meekly on the ground ; and his whole manner was that of a proud nature compelled to submission by a superior power.

She halted ; wheeled about and faced him with resolute but not unkindly eyes, for she remembered that Kenneth had told her she was prejudiced against this man. The time, however, had come for plain speak-

ing, as much in kindness to him as to secure relief for herself.

‘I thank you for your frankness, Mr. Wardlaw,’ she said, with subdued emotion. ‘Let me be equally frank. I had hoped that it would be unnecessary for me to speak; but since it must be, I will speak to you as if you were my friend.’

‘You may rely upon me as your friend, no matter what blow you are about to deal me,’ he said, in sad earnestness.

‘Again, thank you. This kindness on your part helps me.’

‘And that is a satisfaction to me under any circumstances. Speak, Miss Kerr. I wish to hear your voice pronounce my doom.’

‘I know my father’s wishes——’

‘For heaven’s sake, Miss Kerr, speak of no one’s wishes but your own,’ he interrupted.

‘Then will you help me to convince him that his wishes can never be realized?’

There was a pause ; then he spoke, low and huskily, but there was a chivalric self-sacrifice in the words :

‘ You set me a hard task ; but you shall be obeyed. Of what it costs me to obey, I shall say nothing, but some day you may come to understand the sacrifice.’

Who could doubt the sincerity of that ? Milly pitied him, and felt that Kenneth was right : she had been most unjustly prejudiced against the man.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HIDDEN SNARES.

BEFORE landing at New York, Kenneth had decided to engage Davis as his servant to accompany him to Texas. From his own account of himself, this hitherto unlucky fellow was just the sort of handy man required for the work upon which Kenneth was bound, and in the meanwhile he showed every disposition to make himself generally useful.

The man's eyes had lighted up with joy and gratitude apparently at the prospect of immediate work and good wages, and the young adventurer was glad to have with him one who did not seem to be altogether a stranger.

Kenneth was so eager to begin the fight for wealth and fame and Milly, that he was as glad to go ashore as the most sea-sick of the passengers.

A large hotel in Broadway was his destination, such being Sir George's recommendation, for the knight had made several trips across the Atlantic, and was proud of his acquaintance with the manners and customs of the people gained during the occasional month or two he had spent in feasting and sight-seeing. The hall of the hotel seemed to Kenneth like a railway terminus, with an express train about to start, so great was the crowd of people bustling to and fro.

Having made himself master of the hours of meals, posts, and the number and situation of his room, he determined to lose no time in presenting some of the introductions with which Sir George had provided him. Dismissing Davis for the day, he bade him go and make himself acquainted

as well as he could with the principal streets, in order to be prepared to act as messenger if required.

It might naturally be supposed that Tom Davis must have had his heart touched and roused to feelings of gratitude at least, if not of affection, towards the frank youth who had sympathized with him in his trouble, and was now trying to help him to better his fortunes. There had been, indeed, some faint stirrings of this tendency, but the poor man's whole nature was so distorted by envious pride, that he was incapable of gratitude. He was a man of small mind and little nerve, but possessed of a certain narrow kind of intellectual ability, and vain to a degree of insanity. It was the craving for self-importance which induced him to become a member of a secret society, and to submit to the commands of his chiefs to make the villainous attempt in Crathie kirk, which happily his

selfish terrors rendered him incapable of carrying out.

There are men in these societies, whether they call themselves Fenians, Socialists, or Nihilists, who are sincere enthusiasts for their cause, however mistaken they may be; but in this man's case there was no real belief in anything except the importance of his own small self.

Had Kenneth heard his soliloquy on board the *Devonia*, he would not only have been surprised, but would have remembered the Chevalier's warning to beware of strangers as one deserving of more attention than he had given it.

'He is a kind-hearted sort. . . . Oh yes, very kind-hearted! What does it cost him to take me on?—nothing. He must have some one, mustn't he? . . . Of course he must, and it's less trouble to take me than to hunt for somebody, and then I must be grateful. What for? . . . Oh yes, I'll be grateful, never fear, you young

fool! You are everybody, and can give work and money to whoever you like. What are you that you should have all this power and I nothing? . . . But I have a power you don't know of, and I'll use it, too.'

So the spirit of envy possessed the man, and turned the kindness which had been shown him into a cause of spitefulness.

When Davis left the hotel, he at first sauntered along as if he had no other object than that of looking around and making himself acquainted with the appearance of the city, as he had been directed to do. But after a time he made some inquiries of various passers-by, and then got into a car. On descending from it, he made his way into a low quarter of the city, to which his new master was not likely to have any occasion to send him.

When he returned to the hotel, he carried with him a small box of which he was particularly careful.

After having fared sumptuously amidst splendour-loving crowds and the clatter of tongues of all nations, Kenneth devoted some hours to correspondence.

On board the steamer he had written a sort of diary to Milly, and to that he had now only to add the announcement of his safe arrival. Next he addressed himself to her father, and was able to report that he had not allowed the grass to grow under his feet. He had seen, and been kindly received by, two of the business friends to whom he had introductions ; and he had also made the acquaintance of a brother of one of them—a contractor, who had just returned from Arkansas. This gentleman had afforded him valuable information as to the necessary outfit for his prospecting expedition, and intimated that as his contract was nearly run out, there would be shortly a number of workmen in want of employment, so that if his chiefs should decide to purchase the tract of land in

Texas, he, Kenneth, having money at his command, would have no difficulty in finding labourers.

To Balwhap Kenneth wrote a long letter describing his passage. Of New York he told him that it was like fifty Aberdeens, with market day always on, whilst the people looked in as great a hurry as if all their cows were calving at once, and nobody was near to help them.

Two busy days followed, and then Kenneth found himself with his companion, Davis, in a comfortable railway-car on the way to the Golconda which was to give him fortune and a chosen bride. In the bustle and eagerness which had brought him to this country, he had failed to deliver any of Wardlaw's introductions—not because he was influenced by Milly's warning, prejudiced as he considered it, but because he had not had time.

When they were within a hundred miles of the old Spanish town of San Antonio, he

became even more interested in the country through which they were passing than he had been before, and tried to form some idea of its capabilities. Rich prairies stretched on either side of the line as far as the eye could reach, with great herds of hogs and cattle, sheep and horses, feeding 'at large,' and belonging, apparently, to nobody. At long intervals a stoppage at a rough siding afforded him a close view of picturesque log cabins.

At length they reached San Antonio, and though they were by no means at the end of their journey, Kenneth felt as if he were now beginning work in earnest. He was impatient to plant his foot upon the land which held the key of his happiness ; and even after the long journey from New York he was impatient of the necessity to spend the night in San Antonio. In the morning he succeeded in making a satisfactory purchase of a strong, light waggon, and a pair of sturdy, small horses, accustomed

to the country. This enabled him to carry with ease his surveying instruments, tent, tools, cooking apparatus, and a fortnight's provisions. At the same time the vehicle was capable of getting over rough ground quickly.

Leaving San Antonio and the interminable windings of the river behind them, Kenneth, with his faithful attendant, journeyed to the north-west, over miles of prairie land. As he looked on the undeveloped riches of the country, the fancy came upon him that, with a dowerless Milly by his side, he could here, soon, by his own unaided exertions, establish a comfortable and happy home. He was lifted above this necessity, however; but the difficulties before him were none the less great, and the labour none the less arduous.

When they pitched the tent late in the evening, he calculated that they were within a few miles of the land of which he was in search, but the darkness pre-

vented him from discovering their exact whereabouts. Awaking from a long and profound slumber, he found that they were within a few yards of the first stake which marked the boundary of Sir George's intended investment.

He was glad to find that, although he stood in the midst of a vast undulating prairie, there was a more varied landscape beyond—mountains, dense woods, and a river sparkling in the morning sun. He felt that this was not merely a place in which to coin money, but a fitting spot for men to make a home in.

His first day's survey satisfied him that even on account of its agricultural capabilities the land would prove a good investment for any amount of capital. There was timber in plenty; there was unlimited pasture; the indications of the soil in certain parts were that it was rich in minerals; there was a fast-flowing river with numerous streamlets flowing into it.

Within a week he was satisfied that there was untold wealth in the land, and could see in his imagination a great city in this uninhabited desert. He hastened back to San Antonio, and telegraphed his favourable report to Sir George. The answer was in the symbols agreed upon :

‘ Have closed the bargain. The land is ours. Go ahead. Spare no expense.’

Thereupon Kenneth at once telegraphed to Glasgow for the young engineer, Leslie, to come out to him with all speed. This direction was so promptly obeyed that within three weeks Leslie was with him. Meanwhile, Kenneth secured a number of labourers on the spot, and by the assistance of his friend, the New York contractor, he speedily had at his command a gang of workmen who were accustomed to deal with pickaxe and spade. Log-cabins seemed to spring up like Aladdin’s palace ; coal was dug out of the earth as it seemed by the mere scraping of a spade ; shafts

were sunk where requisite, and a rich vein of silver ore was discovered.

Within six months from the date of Kenneth's arrival there was a thriving township established on the banks of the river; hogs, sheep, cattle, and horses purchased from the nearest ranches had already begun to yield a return; and everything to which Kenneth gave his attention prospered beyond his wildest expectations. Almost unlimited wealth seemed to be within his grasp. His own and Milly's future was secure.

Tom Davis had been very useful to him, and was now overseer of a considerable number of men. But Kenneth would have been in no small degree astonished had he known that Davis, in his infatuation, believed himself to be the founder of this thriving community. His ill-will towards Kenneth increased, and if he had allowed so much time to pass without doing him direct injury it was only because in a vague way he

comprehended that his own importance depended on his master, and because in his cowardice he shrank from active violence. Neither the men directly under his sway nor the others in the township liked him. He knew that the slightest sign of treachery would be the signal for lynching him, and he was afraid.

One day a strange workman arrived. He had learned in San Antonio that there was plenty of work in George Town (this was the name by which the Knight of Dunlarig had christened his new possession), and had come to seek a share of it. Davis, on seeing this man make a peculiar sign to him, started, and turned so yellow that he seemed to be sickening for an attack of jaundice.

By-and-by the stranger approached him, and said in a low voice :

‘Time is up. You have got to hurry. You must finish the job before the week is out.’

The miserable man understood that his

master over the water was growing impatient, and that if he did not obey orders his own life would be the forfeit. In the evening he went to his hut, which was next to Kenneth's office, and took out from a dark corner the small box which he had brought back to the hotel in New York.

Glancing round, as if afraid of being observed, he opened it, examined the contents carefully, and arranged them in a particular fashion in a small case. Then producing a tiny key, he inserted it in a hole in the back of a small case, and turned it as if he were winding up a clock. Having arranged the infernal machine, he covered it with a coat and went to the master's office.

Kenneth was coming out.

'You look tired, sir,' said Davis nervously. 'Are you going to work late to-night?'

'Well, I am coming back in about half an hour to write some letters; but I shall not be very late. You can sit in my place

for a bit if you like, and have a look at the newspapers.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The papers did not seem to give Davis much satisfaction. He moved about restlessly, peered in corners and under the rough table which served as desk. Finally he went out and returned with his little case. He lifted a board underneath the table and laid the case in the hollow. Having replaced the board he rose, shivering, and gazed wildly about him as if afraid of spies upon his strange action.

There was murder in the man's look.

When Kenneth returned to the office Davis started up, saying that he had been asleep in the chair, and, muttering a wish that his master might have sound rest, he quitted the place.

Kenneth settled himself at the table with a large sheet of paper before him, and proceeded to talk to Milly about all that was going on, and how much nearer he

was to her, and how soon they would be together never to part any more. He spoke of the foresight and wisdom of her father as marvellous, and of his kindness to him as beyond the power of gratitude to repay.

And all this time the skeleton hand of death was ticking off the moments of his life.

Once or twice in the stillness he fancied that he heard a curious ticking sound, but concluded that it must be one of the mysterious noises of the night, and he went on with his letter.

Meantime that small case was only a few inches from his feet, and the man who put it there was standing at the farthest end of the settlement, with his eyes fixed on the light in the office window, and every muscle and nerve in his body quivering as if he were awaiting his own doom.

CHAPTER XXX.

COMPLICATIONS.

As Milly and Wardlaw were approaching the gates of Dunlarig they were overtaken by the carriage. It stopped, and Sir George got out and joined them. He had been to Aberdeen. His business there must have been of an eminently satisfactory nature, for he greeted them with almost boyish vivacity. Perhaps the sight of his daughter returning in such company from her forenoon ramble may have had something to do with his unusually jovial humour.

‘Well, lucky young people, you have the best of it, with nothing to do but enjoy yourselves, while the old fogies do the toiling and moiling.’

‘I must say, Sir George,’ replied Wardlaw, ‘that your part of the business seems to have agreed with you this morning.’

‘We try to make the best of it—we had our day too. But the worst of it is that we are not always welcome when we come. The young folk are apt to think us in the way.’

This last idea seemed to afford the knight peculiar satisfaction, and he glanced at Milly with an expression of humorous delight.

It was, of course, in some respects a great relief to Milly that her painful *tête-à-tête* with Wardlaw had been interrupted; but knowing that she had just dashed to the ground the castle which her father had been for months busily erecting, she naturally felt somewhat awkward and anxious in his presence.

Sir George put his own construction on his daughter’s silence and serious looks, and was overjoyed by what he supposed to be the result of maidenly shyness. Some

consciousness of this misapprehension on her father's part rendered it impossible for Milly to be in sympathy with his mood. Wardlaw, perceiving her distress, succeeded in diverting the father's attention by making an inquiry concerning some feature in the landscape which he had noticed during the walk. Presently Sir George said :

‘By-the-bye, Wardlaw, I am glad you did not extend your ramble too far this forenoon, for I expect a gentleman to lunch who is, I believe, a friend of yours.’

‘Indeed ! I was not aware that any friend of mine was living in the neighbourhood.’

‘I met him in Aberdeen on a matter of business. His father died recently, and has left him a fine estate, with well-lined coffers to keep it going, although, as I understand, they were not the best of friends during the old man's latter days. But, see ! your friend has arrived before us.’

A chestnut mare was being led by a

groom from the main door in the direction of the stables. On entering the drawing-room with Sir George, it was by no means an agreeable surprise for Wardlaw to see Hugh Cathcart advance to meet them. There was a broad mourning badge on the left sleeve.

So this was the reason of his sudden disappearance. A very satisfactory one for him, evidently.

The two men greeted each other civilly enough, but even Sir George observed that they did not appear to derive great pleasure from the meeting. Cathcart had mentioned that he desired to see Wardlaw about some private affairs, and the knight, with his customary hospitality, immediately invited him to lunch, hoping to afford pleasure to his favourite guest. It occurred to him now that the business might not be of an altogether pleasant nature, and that it would be as well to leave them to get it over before lunch.

When their host had quitted the room Wardlaw said in a satirical tone :

‘ I suppose I must congratulate you on your unexpected accession to wealth and position. It is not to be expected, of course, that Mr. Hugh Cathcart of Airdcluny should trouble himself about my affairs ; but his new position need not make him forget the courtesy due by one gentleman to another.’

‘ You are mistaken. I have been exceedingly active about your affairs—more so a good deal than you will like. At all events, the result of my inquiries is to convince me that my theory is the correct one, and that yours has not a leg to stand on. If you are wise you will compromise the matter while you have a chance of doing so.’

‘ I thank you for your advice, Mr. Cathcart, but I intend to maintain my rights. Nothing short of the estate and title will satisfy me ; and I mean to have them.’

‘ So. Then let us understand each other.

I know that you cannot obtain what you call your rights by fair means, and I have good reason to believe that you will not hesitate to employ foul ones. Consequently I have done with you. I spared no exertion while your case had anything feasible in it, not from disinterested devotion to you, as I have already told you, but because it suited my purpose at the time, and interested me. If you had decided to effect a compromise I could have helped you, having considerable influence with parties on the other side. But I have no mind to burden my conscience on your behalf.'

'I must say that the responsibilities of your position as a landowner have very speedily taught you caution. A pity that you did not exercise some of it in the earlier stages of your career, Mr. Cathcart. But, doubtless, you are aware that you are breaking the contract which you made with me.'

'Perfectly so. It is not a contract, how-

ever, which you would find it easy to enforce by law.' Taking out his pocket-book, Cathcart continued : ' As regards the money which you have advanced to me, you will find in this envelope a cheque, which, I think, covers the whole, with interest.'

Wardlaw, having glanced at the cheque, was placing it in his pocketbook when the gong sounded, and without further conversation the two men proceeded to the dining-room, where they found the rest of the company assembled. Mrs. Woodleigh took the end of the table opposite Sir George, Milly having pleaded a headache as an excuse for resigning the post of honour on this occasion. This was a position in which Mrs. Woodleigh delighted. She was consequently in particularly good humour, and showed to great advantage ; Cathcart and the Chevalier were on her right, Milly and Wardlaw on her left.

Milly had been thinking over their inter-

view, and was more and more convinced that she had done this man great injustice, and that Kenneth had been right. She was therefore inclined to be very gracious to him, in order to make up for the suspicions which she had been entertaining about him, and for the pain which she had been obliged to give him.

The conversation became general now and again, but for the most part Sir George conversed with the Chevalier, Cathcart with Mrs. Woodleigh, and Wardlaw with Milly. In one of these asides Wardlaw informed Milly, in a low tone of tender regret, that he had made up his mind to say farewell to Dunlarig before the week was out, as he thought that was what would be most pleasing to her.

Milly answered also in an undertone :

‘Thank you, Mr. Wardlaw. It seems very inhospitable to be grateful to you for going away, but you will forgive that. I am very grateful to you.’

The look and smile with which these words were accompanied made Wardlaw register a silent oath at which both Kenneth and Milly might have trembled.

He had admired the girl, of course, but hitherto he had admired her fortune still more. To-day, however, in the gentleness and almost submissiveness produced by her feelings of remorse and gratitude, she appeared to him absolutely charming.

Milly's feelings would have been considerably modified had she known how small a share her wishes had in determining Wardlaw to go away. The inconvenient attitude taken up by Cathcart, and the fact that certain affairs of his own required his presence elsewhere, were very considerable forces influencing Mr. Drummond Wardlaw's decision. He had no intention of relinquishing the prize, but by leaving now he secured a kindly place in Milly's thoughts; and a few words whispered to Sir George concerning some of Mr. Cathcart's early

exploits would prevent him from obtaining a footing at Dunlarig in his absence, and possibly from becoming a rival.

Wardlaw was so much taken up with his own thoughts, and with watching the effect of his manœuvres on Milly that he was blind to something going on before him, and which was to have an important bearing on his fortunes.

Mrs. Woodleigh was extremely amiable in her behaviour towards Cathcart, as she understood him to be a friend of Wardlaw's, and her attentions were so cordially responded to that she congratulated herself on having made quite a conquest of him. She congratulated herself still more on learning afterwards from Sir George that Mr. Cathcart was now the owner of the fine property of Airdcluny, within a few miles of Dunlarig.

Cathcart, on his part, as he rode away, thus soliloquized :

‘ I want to settle down. I must have a

wife to make me respectable. That is the very woman for me. She knows everybody round already, and if she marries my estate rather than myself—no matter. We shall get on none the worse for that. Another man would go in for the girl—not me. She is lovely—miles too good for such a scamp as Wardlaw. I should like to have such a daughter, but a wife—no. I want a woman who knows what she is about when she marries a fellow like me. . . . Well, it's not a bad day's work. I've squared old scores with Wardlaw—the new scores he'll have to square with me and Kenneth Gordon.'

The gentlemen were in the smoking-room when Cathcart left. Sir George said to Wardlaw:

'Do you know that the Chevalier intends to leave us to-morrow? He is going to spend a week or two with some old friends in Morayshire.'

‘Ah!’ exclaimed Wardlaw, turning to the Comte de Blanc, ‘I did not know that you had decided on going so soon. But in that case we shall be fellow-travellers as far as Aberdeen, for I, too, must pack up my traps to-morrow.’

‘What, what is that you are saying, Wardlaw? You mean that you have some business in Aberdeen!’ ejaculated the knight.

‘I mean,’ said Wardlaw gravely, ‘that I have had a conversation with your daughter of such a nature that, in justice to myself and her, there is but one course for me to pursue. I must leave Dunlarig immediately.’

‘But—but,’ stammered Sir George, ‘you seemed the best of friends to-day. You never got on so well before.’

‘Just so,’ replied Wardlaw, with some bitterness. ‘You see, she knew that I was going away, and she wished to speed the parting guest.’

The Chevalier’s eyebrows lifted with

satisfaction, and he, like Milly, was deceived into admiration of the lover's self-sacrificing generosity.

Poor Sir George ! This was indeed a sad blow for him. He had been so sanguine all the morning, and had noticed with triumph the little confidential intercourse at table. Indeed, he had been taking himself to task for having been so foolish as to believe in Milly's refusal, when it was a matter of common knowledge that nine times out of ten a lady's 'No' meant 'Ay.' He was convinced that there must be some mistake.

Leaving the two intending travellers in the midst of a discussion about trains, he went excitedly in search of Milly. Fortunately she was not in the drawing-room, but Mrs. Woodleigh was there, and he appealed piteously to her.

'Of course you will not let him go, Sir George. You cannot let your daughter be so wilful.'

‘What can I do? I cannot compel her to say she will marry the man.’

‘Why not? You must be more severe with her. This is what comes of giving her so much of her own way. I always thought no good would come of it. But you must know, Sir George, that it is a matter of everyday occurrence in society for fathers to arrange the marriages of their daughters with quite old men if they have titles and fortunes, though, of course, they would rather have thrown themselves away on poor lieutenants, or poets, or something of the kind. But the silly girls are grateful afterwards, even if they are kept to their rooms on bread and water for a week or two.’

This was not very consolatory to the unfortunate diplomatist. He was feeling very much muddled, and half conscious that he had assumed a *rôle* for which he was unfitted. But yet it was almost insulting to be told that he was reduced to such

vulgar expedients as imprisonment and bread and water.

Mrs. Woodleigh had made him feel, however, that it was his duty to speak to his daughter; and there is no saying how much misery he might have caused himself and her had not Wardlaw entered and carried him away to the library, where he succeeded in presenting matters to him in a much more reassuring light than when the Chevalier had been present.

He told him that it was his opinion that by raising the siege for the present, he would be able to carry the castle by storm by-and-by, and persuaded Sir George that the best thing he could do was to say nothing whatever to Milly about the matter, but to leave her in peace.

He then told the knight that he purposed remaining in Aberdeen for a few days, as he had some business matters to talk over with his lawyer, and that meanwhile he

would telegraph for his yacht to be brought round from Leith.

Sir George was, on the whole, glad to find that there was no immediate need for a struggle with his daughter.

A day or two after the departure of Wardlaw and the Chevalier, Sir George found that some business of an unpleasant nature required his immediate presence in London. He asked Milly if she would like to accompany him, as she was looking pale ; but she begged him to allow her to accept Mistress Babbie's invitation, and go over to Craigness for a time, as she was sure that it would do her far more good.

This arrangement was very satisfactory to Mrs. Woodleigh, as she fully expected that Mr. Cathcart would call at Dunlarig in a day or two, and was not at all averse to being alone when the new laird of Airdcluny came. She knew the estate well, and was aware that it produced a very handsome income.

It was a rare opportunity for a well-preserved and still comparatively young widow to settle comfortably. The mere thought of it was delightful.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SIBYL.

BALWHAP, honest man, felt the absence of Kenneth more keenly than he had chosen to show in act or speech. The actual loss to him in the business arrangements of his extensive dealings in sheep and cattle was considerable ; but he did not think of that, although when anything went wrong he shook his head and muttered to himself :

‘ Ay, that would never have happened if Kenneth had bided at hame.’

This regretful feeling he kept as much as possible to himself, for he regarded it as selfish and ungenerous, considering the circumstances, and was ashamed of it. Kenneth had been offered the chance of

gratifying an eager desire he had long entertained to travel, and opportunities—of which, by all reports, he was making the most with exceptional success—to realize fame and fortune.

But despite his clear recognition of the unkindness of which he would have been guilty had he attempted to keep the 'loon' at home, the old man could not help missing his clever corresponding right hand and trusty account-keeper. Writing a letter was to Balwhap a day's hard work, and he had often declared that he would rather ride a hundred miles than pen half-a-dozen lines. So he got into the way of going more frequently to the little inn of the clachan, as well as to the big inn at Dunlarig, and of staying later at fairs and markets than had been his custom.

All this he fancied passed without observation by anyone ; but grannie's dull eyes followed his movements closely. She understood what was agitating him, and

pitied him. She did not vex him by commenting on this change, but she did what was in her power to comfort him by sending for his niece—a bright, strong, fresh-featured lass, who was, as Kenneth supposed, to be his heir. Balwhap was glad to see his niece—the daughter of the man who had been unlucky in every undertaking—but her presence made no difference to his sense of loss.

Another circumstance, by-and-by, made him miss his foster-son still more than before, if that were possible. By some mischance disease got in amongst his cattle and sheep, threatening most serious consequences, for he had never had such large herds and flocks as at present. He had more faith in Kenneth's veterinary skill than in that of the best 'Vet' in the whole county, and here he was at this most critical moment deprived of his aid.

It was with difficulty that he refrained from uttering his lamentations aloud. How-

ever, he held his tongue, and called in the nearest 'Vet,' who was himself a farmer in the district.

But to make matters worse, there was a sudden stoppage of Kenneth's welcome accounts of himself, which had hitherto arrived regularly once a month.

The first week of disappointment was occupied in restless inquiries of the 'Postie,' every time he passed, whether or not he was *quite* sure that there was no letter from America. The second week was passed in the same way, but with increasing anxiety. The third week his anxiety rose to alarm, mingled with some irritation.

'It wudna hae ta'en him a minute to send us just a scart o' his pen to let us ken how he was getting on,' he grumbled to grannie, and it was the first complaint he had uttered.

At the end of the fourth week he stood at the gate, as had become his habit now,

watching for 'Postie' coming down the road.

'There's your letterie for you noo,' said 'Postie,' a little sourly, for he had become weary of Balwhap's constant inquiries, as well as somewhat indignant at the implied doubt of the care with which he discharged his important duties.

'Come in and hae a dram, man,' cried Balwhap, with gladdened heart, as he recognised the American stamp, which had now become familiar to him. 'Here, lass, gie Postie a dram. I canna bide wi' you myself, but I'll drink to ye after I see the news.'

'Postie' was quite content to be left to help himself to two drams from the well-filled decanter in order to make his 'wish that a' be weel' the more impressive.

Balwhap rushed into the parlour where grannie was seated as usual in her big chair by the fire, with the Bible on her knee.

'News, news, at lang and last!' he shouted, as he tore open the envelope.

He saw that the brief letter was headed George Town, and he was not clerk enough to detect at once that the caligraphy was not his foster-son's. But when he found it begin, 'Dear Sir,' he glanced in quick bewilderment at the signature, which was 'F. Leslie.'

'Vow me !' he ejaculated, his eyes so dimmed that he could not make out the words which followed.

Reading written words was always a slow process with him, and at present he could only stare at the paper in a dazed way, seeing nothing but a splashing of black spots and crooked lines.

'Give me the letter, Mackay,' said a sharp, clear voice authoritatively.

It was grannie who spoke. She was sitting bolt upright in her chair, and the spectacle-covered eyes seemed to glisten upon him with an expression of stern command. He hesitated for an instant, as if even in his agitation he feared to cause her

alarm. A movement of her hand, quick and imperious, and without a word he obeyed.

She read aloud, but was apparently unconscious that she was doing so :

‘I am directed to inform you that Mr. Gordon has been suddenly called away upon an expedition which will occupy him some time, and he may not find it possible to communicate with you for a few weeks, maybe a few months. He is desirous in the meanwhile that you should not be anxious about him on account of his silence, and to assure you that he will take the earliest opportunity of sending you tidings of his whereabouts.

‘At the same time he desires that for the present, or whilst a Mr. W. is in the neighbourhood, you should not make known the fact that you have heard of him to anyone outside your own house, except to M. of D., and P. of C. He says you will understand to whom the initials refer.’

There was silence. Grannie held the letter in a firm grasp. Her face was expressionless, but she seemed to be gazing at something afar off. There was no longer any sign of decrepitude in her posture.

Balwhap, with his large, bright-coloured silk handkerchief, wiped the perspiration from his brow and bald crown. At length he said :

‘Sang! Folk say that nae news is gweed news, but it’s far better to learn even in this way that oor lad is safe. I was getting some scared about him.’

‘He is not safe,’ was the comment, uttered in slow decisive accents, whilst she seemed to be still gazing into space. There was something eerie in the suddenness with which the apparently helpless old woman rose into vigour of body and clearness of vision.

‘Odsake! what can you mean? Surely the man wadna tell a lee after what Kenneth has done for him?’

‘The man is obeying Kenneth, who wishes to hide from us the peril which surrounds him.’

She spoke as one who, looking through a telescope, sees what is hidden from the eyes of others.

‘Of course he is doing his master’s bidding. He says that,’ was the reply of the matter-of-fact Balwhap, although he seemed to be rendered uncomfortable by grannie’s present mood.

He had seen her in this mood at other times, and had never liked it. For, whilst his strong common-sense repudiated the idea that she was a ‘spae wife,’ and gifted with the second-sight, as people said, he was unable to comprehend that her foresight and counsels were the outcome of an acute intellect reasoning carefully and making logical deductions from the facts placed before her. So, whilst he rejected the supernatural as the source of her wisdom, he had enough of superstition in his nature

to make him feel uncomfortable whenever she was roused to exert her gift. Moreover, he had grown up in awe of her power, and trained to implicit obedience to her will.

‘He is ill unto death or badly hurt,’ she continued, ‘for he would never have sent a message to *us* or to *her* by another’s hand so long as his own could hold a pen.’

‘But do you no see he was in haste, and——’

‘Hush!’ She lifted her hand, and he was dumb, waiting for her further speech.

A tongue of flame shot up in the grate and, reflected on her spectacles, made her eyes seem ablaze. A stranger would have been startled by the effect on her withered face, and might have been well excused. Presently :

‘You told me that Drummond Wardlaw left Dunlarig some time ago.’

‘Ay; he was in Aberdeen awhile, and syne sailed aff in his boat. Maybe the Deil has flown awa wi’ him, as I hope he has—

Lord forgive me the word—for naebody kens what has come o' him.'

'He has been there!' she exclaimed, striking the letter fiercely with her hand. 'He belongs to the race that was ready always to do murder for their own purpose—a race that never spared friend or foe. He has been there, trying to rob our Kenneth of his life, as he wishes to rob him of his name, his fortune, and his love.'

'Save's! How can you see a' that?' queried Balwhap uneasily, but with responsive excitement.

She paid no attention to the question, and proceeded with stern calmness:

'Haste you, haste ye to Craigness—do not draw rein till you reach the place! Give him this letter, and tell him how *I* read it. Tell him we must speed to save Kenneth from this fiend. Tell him we must speak quickly or lose all. Tell him the poor creature, George Kerr, is blind as well as a

fool, and is being made the instrument of murder. . . . I have said it. Enough—go!’

She sank slowly back in her chair, and became again the apparently enfeebled, deaf, and indifferent old woman.

Balwhap had taken the letter, folded it, and replaced it in the envelope. He was awed by her vehemence and authority, and did not dare to make a reply. He was alarmed for Kenneth’s safety. However she might have come by her knowledge, however she contrived to read in that letter so much which was invisible to him, he did not doubt that she was right or hesitate to obey.

‘If the beast will keep his legs I’ll be in Craigness in twa hours,’ he said as he left the room.

His thin lips were tightly closed, and there was an unaccustomed frown on his frank ruddy face. The thought that Kenneth was in danger had roused the fiercest passions in his kindly nature. Whilst he

was changing his coat he called to his niece :

‘ Hey, lassie, gie’s a dram—a big dram, for I hae a lang road to travel.’

But there was nothing of the joviality usually in his voice when making such a demand. He was in the fierce mood of one who is going out to battle. Having taken his big dram, he went to the stables and himself harnessed his favourite horse. As a rule he had all the men about the place helping to do the work ; on this occasion he did everything himself, muttering at intervals imprecations which, had they fallen on Wardlaw’s head, must have sunk him if at sea, or crushed him to the earth if on land.

When the horse was secured between the shafts of a light gig, Balwhap took his seat and rode off quietly.

The horse was a sound, sure-footed animal, in the habit of going at a steady trot without the goad of voice or whip ; and

as the road it had to traverse on this journey was a rough one for the greater part of the way, Balwhap would have left it to its own pace at any other time. But, presently his clear ringing voice, rising every few minutes to a sharper key, began to urge it forward.

Then, as the road became more hilly, the whip was applied, and the horse started into a gallop. Balwhap's excitement increased with the pace and the exhilarating effect of the keen air. The brave horse galloped up a steep road and came to the head of a sharp descent. At the foot was a curved bridge crossing a ravine, in the depths of which brawled a stream swollen by recent rains. Beyond the bridge was a steep ascent.

The horse, more discreet than its driver, instantly shied. At this Balwhap, already excited, became furious. He stood up, and, changing the whip to the left hand, grasped the reins with his right, then he

lashed the horse into full gallop down the hill.

His hat was blown off, his white hair streamed in the wind, and anyone who could have seen him, and seen the curved bridge over the black ravine below, would have sickened at the sight of a madman flying to destruction.

It seemed impossible to descend that scarp at such a pace ; it seemed still more impossible to cross that bridge with such an impetus upon horse and vehicle. They *must* go over the low parapet into the abyss.

But so sure was his grip and the feet of the horse that they cleared the bridge in safety, and ascended the opposite steep as if carried on the wind. It was one of those mad acts for which Balwhap was celebrated.

As he had promised, he was at Craigness within two hours, hatless, but well satisfied with his adventure.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE COUNTERPLOT.

THE appearance of Balwhap as he was 'urging his wild career' along the road caused some country-folk to gape with amazement, and save themselves by getting behind a dyke or leaping a ditch. A few stepped boldly forward with the intention of stopping what they imagined to be a runaway horse, but Balwhap impatiently motioned them aside, shouting, 'Out o' the road!' The command was promptly obeyed, the would-be friends imagining that some accident had happened, and he was speeding for a doctor. Those who recognised him exclaimed :

'Eh, there's Balwhap at some ploy

again. 'Od! he maun be riding for a wager!'

His arrival at Craigness in this fashion, however, was taken more seriously. Mistress Babbie, who heard the furious clatter of the horse's hoofs, rushed to the door, and the visitor jumped almost into her arms.

'Guid guide's—what's wrang noo?' she ejaculated, staggering back a pace, her prim headgear much ruffled. 'The man's demented.'

'Na, na, Mistress Babbie, fient a bit o' that—asking pardon for near couping you. But I'm in need o' a word wi' Craigie. I hope he's at hame. Will you tell him that there is muckle need o' his counsel?'

'But what's the steer, man? You look as though you were wud.'

'Vow me! I'm no clear aboot it mysel', but there's a letter come frae ower the water, and the auld wife says he's to see it and hear her reading o't. Let it be ance

telling, mistress. I'll just get ane o' your loons to take care o' the beast, and be back in a minute.'

Leaving the astounded Babbie to carry his message to her brother, he led the foam-covered horse to the stable. There he was assisted by a groom to unyoke it and give it a good rub down. Next with his own hands he carefully covered his faithful servant with a couple of rugs.

'Gi'e him a turn, my man, and see that he's in right fettle afore you put him up, and I'se no forget you. He's an honest beast, and has done his wark weel this day.'

'He hasna been spared, onygate,' said the man, eyeing the horse sympathetically.

This stableman was honest too, and he never liked to see any brute 'ill-used.' The reproach added to the mortification Balwhap was already feeling as he looked at the horse's quivering limbs, and this

feeling moderated his excitement as he returned to the house.

Although obliged to be careful in his diet and outgoings, Craigie was no longer a prisoner in his house. He was on his feet again, and he 'jaloused' that there were some folk who would not rejoice at the circumstance. He was able to go to the office, and to spend a few hours there on three or four days of the week. His visits were irregular, and in that way exercised a wholesome check over any officials who might be inclined more for play than work. He had been considerably startled by the discovery that during his absence from business the London house had entered upon various extensive and perilous speculations.

'Geordie has gane clean aff his head since he took up with that deil Wardlaw.'

That was his reflection, but he said little to the manager or cashier. He decided

that in the meanwhile all he had to do was to keep a keen eye on the accounts, the correspondence, and the progress of the speculations which had been too hastily entered upon. He belonged to the old school of business men, whose motto was 'Slow and sure,' and who never reached out an arm farther than they could draw it back with ease. On this base the great house of Kerr and Co. had been built, and Craigie could not be brought to see the advantage of making a fortune one day to lose it another, even if it should be won back the day following.

'We used to do things because we kenned that there was a reasonable profit to be got out of them,' he would say to his partner. 'Nowadays business is a kind of pitch-and-toss, and more is done by guess than knowledge.'

Thus habit and nature combined to make Craigie very uneasy about the course which his partner had been recently following.

The partner, by the way, was called his senior in the partnership, although he was his junior by a round number of years. Craigie had seen Sir George grow up from childhood, and still regarded him as a boy, or little more, much to the annoyance of the knight, who felt that he had sufficiently distinguished himself in the conduct of the London house to be considered a man of very sound mettle indeed.

When Mistress Babbie, with the exaggeration unavoidable in a state of excitement, informed her brother of Balwhap's arrival and the manner of it, with the message he had charged her to deliver, Craigie said, shortly :

‘ He’s been drinking.’

‘ I think no,’ said Mistress Babbie emphatically, ‘ though that was what came into my head at the first glimpse o’ him. But he hasna had more than his ordinar’, or he would not have been so careful about his beast. There’s something wrong about

Kenneth, puir lad, and that's what the steer is about.'

'Where is Milly?' was the brother's query, after a brief pause, during which he had poked the fire and smashed a lump of coal in a manner that at any other time would have called down upon him the severe reprehension of his sister.

'Where's Milly? You might ken that without speiring. She's doon among the fisher-folk, as usual. Auld Tibbie Tamson is laid up again, and nothing will serve the bairn but to go and nurse her as though she was the nearest friend.'

'I am glad she is out of the way,' was Craigie's comment, as he looked up with an expression of relief.

'Sirs the day!' ejaculated Babbie, 'that's the first time I ever heard ye say that you were glad she was not at hand.'

'Never you heed, Babbie. I *am* glad she is out of the way, for I'm doubting that Balwhap brings us news that it may

be as weel to keep out of her hearing for the present at any rate. I have been feared about Kenneth ever since that birkie Wardlaw sailed away in his yacht without letting anybody ken where he was going, or what he was going to do. You tell Balwhap to come up this minute.'

When the visitor presented himself he was much calmer than he had been since the receipt of Leslie's letter, but he was still restless and eager to get at the bottom of a matter which had assumed an appearance of such ominous mystery in grannie's eyes. He became still calmer after he had refreshed himself from the decanter placed before him by Mistress Babbie, who never forgot the rites of hospitality, no matter what disturbing elements might be at work.

'Here's the bit letter,' said Balwhap in response to an inquiry from Craigie, who had exchanged friendly greetings with the farmer.

‘Read it out, Peter; I’ll no be at rest till I hear every word that’s in it,’ said Babbie, smoothing her apron briskly, as if employing her hands in that way in order to keep them from attacking some invisible enemy.

The letter was read accordingly, and when Craigie had finished he took the glasses from his nose to stare at Balwhap.

‘I see nothing so very particular in this,’ he said slowly, as if not quite sure of being right.

‘Dod, man, that’s just what I said—naething extraorinar’ that I could see; for Kenneth was ay the lad to push on farther and farther in onything he took up wi’, and it was natural that, being in a new country, he should want to learn about it. He ay wanted to ken what was ahint the moon. But hearken what grannie says.’

He repeated the message with the singular accuracy of one who has been deeply impressed by the words with which

he is charged. As he proceeded, describing grannie's agitation as she had spoken, Craigie's aged face became clouded. He resumed his glasses and read the letter again, whilst Balwhap, much relieved by the accomplishment of his mission, helped himself to another dram.

Babbie watched her brother's countenance and remained silent; this was the strongest token she could give that her spirit was much moved; for as a rule she was quick to form an opinion about persons and things, and equally quick to express it.

After long deliberation Craigie spoke, but rather as if unconsciously uttering his thoughts than addressing his companions.

'She sees clearer than us. I must write to Edinburgh to-day and tell the lawyers to look sharp, and I must find out what Geordie can tell us about Wardlaw's movements.'

'Ay, and you will have to send word at

once to this Mr. Leslie, and bid him give us particulars about Kenneth without delay,' added the sister.

'You're right, Babbie; you are very right. We'll telegraph to him to-day. . . But I wish Geordie was here. He keeps putting off coming, for what reason I can hardly understand.'

'Hoots, Peter, you ken weel enough it's this new craze he has got about building a grand castle in London that's to be bigger and brawer than the Queen's ain palace. He's just speeding to rack and ruin with his ambitious notions.'

Craigie groaned, for this was his fear put into words; but he feared the castles in the air Sir George was building more than the one of solid masonry he was erecting in Kensington.

Balwhap had been all eyes and ears while the brother and sister were speaking. He did not understand what was implied about the folly of the Knight of Dunlarig, but he

did understand that they, like the grannie, suspected that Wardlaw was capable of any degree of villainy towards Kenneth.

‘Do you mean to say that you think like the grannie that this birkie would venture upon doing ony ill to our lad?’ he asked; and his speech was slower, more meditative than they had ever known it before.

‘There is no saying what such a man might attempt,’ answered Craigie gravely; ‘he has a great fortune, not to mention the title, at stake. In a position of that kind men are sorely tempted to try and settle things by any means that will suit themselves.’

‘Say ye? . . . Weel, there’s a shorter way of finding out what the scoundrel has been doing than by waiting for news frae across the seas or even for the coming of Sir George.’

‘How can you manage that, Balwhap?’ was the eager inquiry.

‘ You ken that he came to my house with that ne’er-do-weel Hugh Cathcart—wha is no an ill sowl in the main. You ken, moreover, that Cathcart is noo laird of Airdcluny, and folk tell me that he has turned ower a whole bookie of new leaves.’

‘ He has long been a close friend of Wardlaw’s, and is not likely to say anything that may help us or harm him. So if, as I suppose, you are thinking of asking him for information it will be time wasted.’

‘ That’s preceesely what I am thinking about doing, and I am certain the time will no be wasted, or confidence put in him misguided.’

‘ I know he does not mean any harm, poor man, but he has been under many obligations to Wardlaw,’ said Craigie, shaking his head doubtfully.

‘ That may be, but he is under obligation to Kenneth for his life. You maun ken that our lad luggit him out of the water at Deefoot when he was capseezed in a boatie,

and no another creature that was by would risk trying to save him.'

'Oh !' ejaculated brother and sister in surprise, mingled with satisfaction. Then Craigie added :

'Kenneth never told me about that.'

'Likely no, and he never said a word about it to me either. I learned it frae Cathcart himsel', and at the time he was speaking he said that if ever he could do a guid turn to our lad he would do it, and upset the nonsense story that when you save a man frae the water you make an enemy for life. Noo, I believe that Airdcluny was meaning what he said, and I'm going to try him.'

Balwhap rose as if about to take his departure on the instant.

'Sit down, man,' said Mistress Babbie peremptorily; 'we have not arranged matters yet. Do you no see that Peter is thinking?'

'Ay, ay, but we'll have everything clear before us in a minute now,' was Craigie's comment, after a brief deliberation. 'Go

to Cathcart, as you propose, Balwhap, and trust him with the whole story. If he will help us, so much the better. If he will not, then he cannot do us much harm, for the whole affair will be in the papers in a few days. I shall telegraph to Leslie, and in three weeks at any rate we will have full particulars of Kenneth's movements. You come back as soon as you have seen Cathcart, and tell me what he says. That is all we can do at present. The lawyers must see about the rest.'

'Ay, but what about Milly?' broke in Babbie; 'she has been down enough for ten weeks past because she got nae news. What are we to say to her?'

'Tell her that he is safe, and that she will see him before long,' was the decisive answer of the brother.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FORECASTS.

DURING the time Milly had been staying at Craigness she had experienced a higher degree of happiness than she had known since her father had explained his wishes regarding Drummond Wardlaw. She was released from Mrs. Woodleigh's too careful chaperonage, which had become particularly unpleasant from that lady's insistence upon the merits of the rejected suitor. Milly shrank the more from her because she imagined that Mrs. Woodleigh persisted in urging his claims when the man himself had abandoned them. She had no suspicion of the understanding which existed between them.

Of course Mrs. Woodleigh called at Craigness at regular intervals, in order to see her 'dear child;' but on these occasions Mistress Babbie was always to the fore, and the least reference to Wardlaw started her on such a series of sarcastic inquiries about that gentleman's antecedents and present whereabouts that the smooth-tongued widow was glad to escape under a mask of polite meekness and a profession of ignorance.

The two women understood each other perfectly. The blunt, clear-sighted, sharp-tongued Babbie could not be flattered into complaisance by any effort of Mrs. Woodleigh; and the latter, conscious that her arts were powerless in dealing with a savage (such was her private designation of Babbie), retired with what grace she could from all contest with her. She would not have been so easily put down, however, if she had not been at this juncture engaged in an important intrigue

on her own account with the new laird of Airdcluny.

‘A meddlesome bizzom! I wonder how your father can thole her,’ was Mistress Babbie’s opinion of the polished lady who had condescended to occupy the position of lady housekeeper at Dunlarig.

So Milly was guarded from Mrs. Woodleigh’s importunities, and she was grateful to her for making her visits few and far between, without caring to inquire too curiously why.

Then there was the other great relief. Her father had not insisted strongly upon taking her to London. He was, in fact, privately chuckling to himself at the idea that he would, within a few months, lead her into the Aladdin’s palace he was creating, and say to her:

‘There, my child, my dear Countess of Benvoir, all this is yours! I have made it for you, and you are to be happy in it. Of course you will spend the autumn at

Dunlarig when you do not care to visit the Continent. During the season I shall drop in and make one of the crowd in the receptions which I expect you and his lordship to give. But you shall not find me obtrusive. No, no ; I have seen that sort of thing going on, and seen how it spoiled everybody's comfort. A silly father, or, what is more frequent, a silly mother, desires to advance a daughter in social position, but is equally desirous of advancing with her. That cannot be done. The old folks must draw into the background at once, or spoil their own work. I mean to go into the background, and so shall have more leisure to look on and enjoy the sight of my child, a real countess and a shining light in society.'

These were the pleasant dreams which enabled Sir George to bear, and in some respects to neglect, certain awkward currents in his business that were threatening to cripple him more seriously than he sus-

pected. He had already advanced enormous sums to Wardlaw for the prosecution of his claim to the Earldom and estates of Benvoir. What did that matter? It was all Milly's, and when she became the Countess there was a net rent-roll of fifteen thousand a year. And whilst the majestic walls of the castle were rising in Kensington the legal course of the claim was proceeding satisfactorily. The petition had been presented to the Queen, and had been duly referred to the House of Lords. Meanwhile the estate had been placed in the care of a judicial factor.

There were whispers of opposition and of another claimant, but Sir George paid no attention to such nonsense. He knew that Wardlaw was safe to win, if there was any justice to be obtained by right, backed by capital. He had almost forgotten Kenneth, and he thought little of his daughter's feelings regarding that personage. He was aware that she was wilful; but he believed

that she was not a fool, and would recognise the advantages of obedience when the final arrangements came to be made.

Had Milly known how fondly he was cherishing these plans, and how eagerly he was arranging every detail of her future, she would have been miserable. But, knowing that Wardlaw was away, and trusting in his honour that he had finally relinquished all expectation of persuading her to be his wife, she was happy. Coronets were of no account in her estimation, and even if she had tried she could not imagine herself caring more than she did now for Kenneth if he had the right to wear one.

His letters came to her full of tender thought and glowing accounts of the success which attended every step he took in the enterprise on which her father had started him. These kept her heart light and her spirits high. And she was busy, too, staying at Craigness, for the winter was always a hard time amongst the fisher-folk in the

little village, and she was able to help them not only by providing them with little luxuries, but by her cheery presence and willing hand. There was not a man or woman in the place who did not look upon her as a sort of guardian angel, almost too good for common life.

‘Vow me!’ was the frequent ejaculation of Lang Nicol Johnstone, ‘the very sight of her puts pith and joy into a man. After the sea took a’ my bairns save wee Nicol, I never thought that I would care for onything or onybody in this world. But she cured me.’

This Nicol Johnstone—called ‘Lang,’ to distinguish him from his son, who was called wee Nicol or wee Nick—was one of the elders of the hamlet, but still a hale and stalwart man. Six sons had been born to him—the sixth a helpless cripple. The five others grew up to be sturdy lads, and all had been drowned. The loss of the first three he had endured with the stolid

resignation which is inculcated in those whose lives are habitually in peril ; but when his smack capsized, and he, clinging to the keel, saw the other two go down, he became sullen and found no consolation in life. He almost hated the poor cripple who was left to him, and for a time was too morose even to speak to him.

But when Milly came amongst them she won him to a kindlier mood ; and wee Nick, although incapable of working as a fisherman, proved himself so deft a cooper that he was soon able to earn a good wage, and with it materially aided his father to become again sole owner of a smack. The cripple was bright and inventive. He was not content to make only herring barrels ; he produced the neatest luggies or coggies that could be found in the ' Timmer Market ' of Bon Accord ; he made salt-boxes which speedily gained the approbation of all the thrifty housewives for miles around ; and he turned out snuff-boxes with wooden

hinges which were declared by the Aberdonians to be the finest things of the kind ever seen. For Milly he made a wonderful work-table of various woods, so artistically harmonized in colour that she pronounced it a painting rather than a piece of wood-work. He had been offered what would have been to him a considerable sum for it by an Aberdeen dealer in curiosities ; but he could not be tempted. From Milly he would accept nothing ; and, although she had been in the habit of giving and lending him books, it was not until some time after the work-table had been conveyed to Dunlarig that he would allow her to continue these favours.

His fame spread, and orders for various kinds of woodwork crowded upon him, so that the poor cripple who had been for a time regarded as a burden on the household became its mainstay. Good and bad seasons were alike to Lang Nicol Johnstone now. Thanks to wee Nick he became

the most important man in the hamlet, and in secret he bitterly repented the evil thoughts which had filled his mind when he found that of his six children only this deformed creature was left to him.

Milly was unconscious of the good work she had wrought. She was glad to be amongst these honest folks again, free from all the trammels of 'company' manners and conventionalities, and she was free from anxieties until the sudden stoppage of Kenneth's letters.

Then, like Balwhap, she wondered and worried, so that when Babbie told her the good news which had come from George Town—that he was safe, and only prevented from writing by the impossibility of getting letters forwarded—she was restored to peace of mind and as much content as a girl can feel when she learns that for a time there can be no communication with her lover.

Being assured of his safety, she was in-

clined to be angry with him for the fright he had given her. She did not pout, but she spoke with a flush on her cheeks :

‘ What in the world can he want to find now ? Has he not got everything he wants except—except me ? And does he think he is likely to please me by setting off on a wild-goose chase after something he does not want ? ’

‘ Lads will be venturesome, and I daresay he has reason for what he is about. ’

This was Babbie’s way of explaining the mystery, but she was mentally praying for forgiveness, as she was keeping back the suspicions which she and her brother entertained that there was something wrong with Kenneth, and that the letter from Mr. Leslie was a subterfuge.

‘ What reason *can* there be in going out of his way to make us anxious about him ? ’

‘ There is no saying. We will just have

to wait till we get more information,' said Babbie placidly.

Milly was obliged to be content, for Craigie could give her no better satisfaction than his sister had done. She was relieved, and yet angry. But the anger was soon softened by the recollection that Kenneth was ready to venture everything in order to please her father and reconcile him to their union. But when would he write—when would she know where he had gone to and what he was doing ?

'We shall have news in a few days,' said Craigie, unable to withstand her eager inquiries ; 'I have telegraphed to Mr. Leslie.'

On the following morning there was a brief intimation from Sir George that he might be expected at Dunlarig in a few days, and that he wished Milly to be there to receive him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SIGNS OF MISCHIEF.

‘THAT’S a great satisfaction—a very great satisfaction,’ said Craigie, after he had read the intimation that his partner would soon arrive; ‘and if it was not that he takes you away from us, Milly, my lass, I should say that it was the best thing that could happen for all parties concerned. In fact, though it does take you away, I’m of a mind to say that, under the circumstances, it is the best thing that could happen for us.’

‘Maybe ay and maybe no,’ commented Mistress Babbie grimly; ‘but what would you say till’t if he should be fetching the creature Wardlaw with him again?’

For an instant Milly was startled by this suggestion, but it was only for an instant. The confiding nature of the girl accepted with entire faith the pledge of Wardlaw that he would not again intrude his attentions upon her; and she believed that if he did come, it would be in the character of a friend who had conquered or put aside all thought of a closer relationship.

‘I do not think it will matter much if Mr. Wardlaw should come for the shooting again,’ she said contentedly; but there was a slight flush on her cheeks, for she knew that the reason for her indifference on the subject could not be explained to anyone without some breach of respect to the man whose hand she had refused, and who had accepted his rejection in the most honourable spirit.

Babbie’s sharp eyes scanned the fresh young face with surprise and curiosity. The flush on it stirred a most disagreeable suspicion. Could it be possible that Milly,

like her father, had been caught by this man's wiles ?

‘It’s no possible that you would like to see him back again?’ she almost gasped.

‘I should be glad if he would stay away,’ answered the girl, with a little laugh, ‘but his coming or not coming can make no difference to me.’

‘I hope it may be so, bairn,’ observed Babbie, relieved, but not quite satisfied.

Then they were both startled by an interjection of Craigie’s in a louder voice than usual :

‘On my word I should be real glad if he did come ; for then I would have him under my own observation, and feel sure that he was not working any mischief to——’

He stopped, and completed the sentence in a mumble that was only intelligible to himself.

Milly was amused as well as surprised by Craigie’s sudden desire for the presence

of a man for whom he had always displayed the most marked signs of dislike.

‘Why, the last time he was mentioned,’ she said, laughing, ‘you declared that his room was better than his company, and that you hoped he would never show himself in this quarter again!’

‘So I did, so I did; but at that time I had no suspicion of what has been borne in upon me to-day. You must understand, my lass, that there are whiles when we wish a nasty thing was just out of sight and out of mind. But there are other whiles when we want to see the nasty thing in order to watch its movements, and so be ready to prevent it from hurting anybody.’

‘But who can Mr. Wardlaw want to hurt?’ inquired Milly, a little bewildered by this oracular speech.

‘Did I say he wanted to hurt anybody?’ answering with a question, whilst his eyes blinked with pretended astonishment.

‘Oh, you are making fun of me,’ she exclaimed cheerily, as she rose.

‘Just that, just that—it was my joke,’ rejoined Craigie, glad to escape further questioning in this easy way.

‘And where might you be off to now?’ queried Babbie, pleased that the girl’s mind should remain undisturbed by the suspicions which haunted her brother and herself.

‘Only to see how old Libbie and wee Nicol are getting on. I suppose I shall have to say good-bye to them.’

‘There is no such great hurry. You can bide till your father says what day we are to expect him. Awa wi’ you and get the fresh air, but mind and be in to your denner.’

Milly with a nod and a happy smile quitted the room. Brother and sister looked at each other as if relieved, and he produced a second letter from Sir George, which, although delivered by the same post as

the first, had been written some hours later.

‘Weel, what is’t he says about Kenneth?’ asked Mistress Babbie eagerly.

Craigie deliberately read the contents again before replying. Then :

‘The matter looks worse than I thought. I’m feared the auld grannie’s gift of the second-sight is about to prove a verity this time. She said that there was murder meant’ (he spoke under his breath, as if the mere word frightened him), ‘and what Geordie says here forces upon me the fear that she may not be mistaken.’

‘What is’t he says?’ repeated Mrs. Babbie impatiently.

‘He says, “The mail is in again, and still there is nothing from Gordon, and it is now nearly two months since I had a letter from him. This is not only unbusiness-like neglect of duty, but insolent ingratitude, considering the extent to which I have trusted him. To render his neglect

the more unpardonable, drafts for very heavy amounts, signed by him, have been drawn on the house and presented, whilst he has not sent us any intimation regarding them. This passes all bounds of endurance."

. . . Geordie maun have been in a fine flisk when he wrote that way.'

'He might have thought that the lad was ill and no able to write!' was the indignant ejaculation of the sister.

'Ay, and without a doubt he would have thought of that,' continued Craigie gravely, 'for he had ay a kindly notion of the lad; but how was he to think it when, if Kenneth was ill, there was nothing to prevent him telling Leslie to report the facts? Geordie has got a letter from Leslie, reporting satisfactory progress in all departments, but he does not refer to Kenneth or the drafts.'

Babbie sat bolt upright in the chair, her eyes opened wide with alarm.

'Mercy on's, Peter, there has been some waeful work owerby yonder!'

‘ Ay, ay, Babbie, that’s just what I am thinking ; but we will have to keep a calm sough yet awhile. Of one thing I am certain, and it is a great relief to my mind—Kenneth is not dead.’

‘ How can you be sure of that—how can you be sure of anything, when the poor lad is in the midst of dangers that he can neither see nor understand ?’

‘ You often call me a doited body, Babbie,’ said Craigie, with a solemnity which subdued her irritability, ‘ but I’m thinking it’s yoursel’ that’s doited enow. Will you have patience till I explain ?’

‘ I’m dumb—ye ken weel enough I can be dumb when I like.’

‘ Ay, and whiles I wish you would like to be so oftener,’ he said, with a faint smile, and shaking his head, unable even in this hour to keep back the sarcasm. ‘ No offence intended, Babbie, so just bide quiet and hearken.’

‘ Am I no quiet ?’ she asked, with hands

folded on her lap, and closing her thin lips tightly.

‘Very well, Babbie—very well; then this is what I make out of it. Something has happened to Kenneth that he does not want us to know about for the present. Whatever it be, he is unable to write with his own hand. So he gets up this story about being suddenly obliged to start on an expedition into the wilderness, in order that we may understand why he cannot send letters as usual, the fact being that he is lying at George Town, dangerously hurt some way. Maybe he has tumbled down one of his coal or silver mines, or got worried by a wild beast, and broken his arm. Likely enough that’s the whole story. But——’

Craigie paused, and examined the letter again. Mistress Babbie, notwithstanding the dumb attention she had promised, spoke :

‘Ay, Peter, it’s the *but* I want to hear about—what is’t?’

‘There’s little to say on that head, although much to conjecture—it’s the bills drawn on the house that are the key to the treachery which is blackening Kenneth in Geordie’s eyes. My opinion is that he knows nothing about them, that he never signed them, and that they are forgeries. Somebody, calculating that he is dead, and can never come back to tell tales, has forged his name, and the fools in London have allowed the forgeries to pass. Now Kenneth is not dead ; he has got an inkling of the mischief that is at work, and he wants to keep quiet till he can come down on the villain or villains without giving them a chance to escape. It is for that reason that he wants nobody except Milly and us to learn that there has been word from him.’

‘Eh, Peter, and is there onybody you suspect of this fearsome wickedness?’

‘We’s just let that flee stick to the wa’ in the meanwhile, Babbie,’ answered the brother

with canny reserve. 'You and I have our own thoughts on the subject, and it will be as well to keep them in our own breasts till the proper time comes. To my thinking there is only one person in the whole world that could wish to work such wrang to Kenneth—that could wish to destroy his life, and failing that, to destroy his honest character. I imagine that your thoughts take the same direction as mine ; but we'll say nothing even between ourselves until we get more news from Mr. Leslie.

'He will have your message by this time, and it's a pity you did not tell him to answer by telegraph.'

'I did that, and doubtless we will have some word from him in the course of the day. But patience, Babbie, patience ; you are ay preaching it to me whenever pains are dirling through me, wringing out skirls of wrath and agony. Take your own counsel back now.'

Mistress Babbie was too much relieved

by the prospect of having further news concerning Kenneth in the course of a few hours to heed the dart which was flung at her so good-naturedly. The message did come in the afternoon, but it was so vague that she did not obtain much satisfaction from it.

‘Am writing by next mail. Fear nothing. All right.’

This ought to have been completely reassuring, and would have been if it had come from Kenneth ; but as it came from Leslie, the brother and sister were still oppressed by fear and doubt.

* * * * *

As Milly approached the hamlet she saw lang Nicol Johnstone standing on an eminence near Craigness Point, with hands shading his eyes, and gazing seaward. Naturally she looked in the direction to which his attention seemed to be attracted. She saw in the offing a trim yacht ; the sails were furled, but a white funnel rising

behind the main-mast proclaimed the vessel's independence of wind. At present the yacht seemed to be lying at anchor.

‘What boat is that, Johnstone?’ she asked as she advanced to him.

‘That is precisely what I am wanting to make out,’ he replied respectfully enough, but without altering his position in any degree. ‘She’s been hanging about here for the last fortnight, and no a sowl among us kens wha she belongs till, or what she wants.’

‘Very likely it is waiting for the owner.’

‘Maybe, but in that case what for should it no gang into harbour? We hae come upon it at night and in the early hours of the morning, but as soon as the fishing fleet got within hailing o’t—fluff gaed the smoke and awa’ steamed the boatie far out of our road. But ay she comes back and hangs about out yonder.’

‘It looks a very nice boat,’ she said

simply ; and then, with a gleam of fun in her eyes, added quickly—‘ It is not a ghost ship, at any rate, Johnstone, for a ghost would never take the trouble to get up steam.’

‘ Na, na—fient a ghost about her,’ answered the fisherman as solemnly as if the remark had been made in earnest. ‘ She has ta’en in coals baith at Peterhead and Steenhyve, and what is more to the purpose she has sent one of her small boats ashore.’

‘ Then you must have spoken to some of the people. What did they want at Craigness ?’

‘ I couldna say, for I wasna at hame, you see, or I would have learnt a’ about them. But one o’ them visited wee Nicol, and bought a wheen boxes and coggies just as curiosities, you ken, and paid weel for them.’

Lang Nicol spoke with an affectation of indifference regarding the visitor from the mysterious craft, and the good stroke of

business which his son had transacted with him ; but it was evident that his pride was hurt by the secondary part he was obliged to play in relation to the mystery.

‘Did Nicol not learn the name of the boat or of the owner?’ inquired Milly, interested.

‘I didna speir,’ was the laconic response. ‘We have never been able to make out the name, and we are doubtful if she has a name, though there’s a heap of golden knots and straiques on the prow and stern, where the name should be. But *I* could make nothing o’ them, and, of course, there was naeboddy else in the fleet that could do it.’

‘Oh, I have no doubt it belongs to one of the Southern yacht clubs, and is waiting about for some other boat to join it in a cruise in the Northern seas. I am going down to see Nicol, and I shall ask him all about the man who was such a good customer.’

She looked again at the yacht in the

offing, and could not help saying to Johnstone, who was still watching it suspiciously—

‘It’s one of the finest yachts we have seen on the coast as long as I can remember, and the owner must be some great man.’

‘It’s a bonnie bit boatie,’ said Johnstone critically, ‘and I wish it mayna bode us ony ill.’

Amazed with lang Nicol’s wise shaking of the head as he gave this last expression to his suspicions of the strange craft, and amused with herself on account of the curiosity he had excited in her mind, Milly proceeded to the Fishers’ Row.

The hamlet consisted of no more than a dozen cottages, or huts they might be called. The walls were about twelve or fourteen feet in height, built of rough stones, plastered with mud, and white-washed. The slanting roofs were of thatch, which from their exposed position required to be so frequently patched that time was not

allowed to ornament them with many shades of colour. Each cottage comprised a 'but and a ben,' with a mid place which was used indifferently as a cupboard or store-room and extra sleeping berth, according to the requirements of the family. Triangular 'fish-hakes' were nailed to the walls beside the doors, and on them hung herrings to dry in the sun, whilst on the top of the surrounding dykes, haddocks, newly opened and cleaned, were spread for the same purpose. Tawny nets dangled from high cross poles, or were stretched on the grass. The women sat at their doors shelling bait, patching clothes, knitting stout socks, and gossiping in shrill voices. Everyone gave a blithe greeting to Milly as she passed, and some of the elder wives saluted her with a brusque but reverent 'Lord be gweed till ye, bairn.'

When she reached Johnstone's cottage she turned at once into the apartment on the left. Wee Nicol was seated in a wheel-

chair, made with his own hands, which enabled him to move about, indoors and out, with remarkable facility. He was at his bench, which was placed near the window, and little piles of the woodwork in which he delighted lay around him in various stages of progress.

His sallow face brightened at her entrance. He laid down his work, and turned his chair round quickly.

'I was wearying for you to come,' he said, 'for I have something queer to tell you.'

'What is that, Nicol?'

'There was a man in here buying some things, and he was speirin' about you.'

'About me?'

'Ay. Wanting to ken what time you came down from the house, and how lang you bided when you came.'

'Why did he ask such questions?'

'I could not learn, but he came from the

strange yacht that has been fleeing up and down the coast lately.'

Milly was puzzled, and Lang Nicol's words—"I wish it mayna bode us ony ill"—recurred to her with unpleasant suggestiveness.

CHAPTER XXXV.

‘MAN-STALKING.’

AFTER Sir George and his guests had left Dunlarig, and Milly had gone to her friends the Pittendrieachs, Mrs. Woodleigh began to find time hang somewhat heavily on her hands, notwithstanding her occasional visits to Craigness—but, indeed, these visits were never agreeable to her. She had superintended the due performance of all the customary rites of purification throughout the house, which had thus, as it were, washed its hands of the noble guests whom it had harboured and shaken any remaining dust of them off its feet. This operation had been prolonged a little unnecessarily, as it would have been most vexing to be out when Mr. Cathcart called.

It seemed, however, that he was not coming after all. 'He must have heard of Sir George's sudden departure, and have determined to postpone his visit till the return of the master of the house. Very proper of him, but for all that Mrs. Woodleigh's vanity was somewhat hurt. Still the sting was not sufficiently deep, to deprive life of all its joys.

It was a source of great pride and satisfaction to her, when left in possession, that Sir George always placed a carriage at her disposal. To be able to order the carriage round for her sole use at what hour she pleased made her feel for the time as if she were really mistress of all she surveyed. She determined not to postpone the gratification of this sensation any longer.

On the morning after coming to that decision, she received a letter from a particular friend of hers—quite a young lady, only a few years older than Milly. She was the daughter of a neighbouring country doctor,

and had occasionally shared Milly's studies under Mrs. Woodleigh, to whom she had taken a great fancy. In spite of the difference of years, they were fast friends and gossips. She had been recently married to the newly appointed minister of the parish in which the Airdcluny estate was situated, and in her letter to Mrs. Woodleigh the bride announced her homecoming, at the same time entreating her friend to call at once, as she had a great deal to tell her.

Mrs. Woodleigh, like a skilful sports-woman, saw many possibilities in this visit. Accordingly she sent orders to John to bring the landau round at eleven o'clock, and to be ready to be out for the day.

Servants are not always agreeable to people in Mrs. Woodleigh's position, and some coachmen might have kicked up their heels at having to obey her orders; but her tact and thorough mastery of all the trifles which go to make a good manager of a household

made her popular enough with those under her in the Dunlarig establishment. Smith (Milly's aristocratic maid) was the only exception. She, considering herself entitled to be a great lady, disdained to demean herself by rendering any service to one who was, in her opinion, 'only a housekeeper after all, though she did give herself airs.' It was gall and wormwood to her to see Mrs. Woodleigh drive out like a fine lady in the carriage; and had she possessed any influence with John she would have incited him to rebellion.

But John knew on which side his bread was buttered. Mrs. Woodleigh never forgot to let her friends know that although she did not care for wine, John liked his dram. That attraction, combined with the prospect of getting the news in the 'bygaing,' made him quite willing to exercise his horses with 'a ceevil enough spoken body ahent them.' He had a married sister living on the Airdcluny estate,

so he was pleased to be going in that direction.

On the way to the manse Mrs. Woodleigh thought, as she had often thought before, how nice it would be to have a carriage of her own, and she resolved that it would not be her fault if she did not have one soon. Sir George was impossible ; but he was not the only game in sight.

Besides, she would always have despised Sir George a little ; but Cathcart was not the sort of man to be despised. Indeed, it was just possible that he might be a man to be feared. She began to wonder if she would see him to-day.

A coincidence brought about the realization of her desire.

Mrs. Scott had learned that a young servant was about to leave Airdcluny. Mrs. Woodleigh immediately became aware that she was going to dismiss an inefficient under-housemaid (the poor girl was quite unconscious of her impending fate). Mr.

and Mrs. Scott would accompany her to Airdcluny, and call on their parishioner, while she made inquiries as to the young woman's character. She would thus see the house, and establish relations with the enemy in the shape of Mrs. Donaldson, the cross-grained old housekeeper.

Fortune favoured the assailants, for they met the master of Airdcluny on his doorstep, and were received by him with a rough and ready cordiality.

'Come inside, ladies; you must excuse me if I cannot receive you with proper ceremony. This is bachelor's hall at present.'

He led them to the library, the only room in which there was a fire. There were plentiful signs of his presence—pipes, glasses, bottles, riding whips, and newspapers, littered about; but it was a very comfortable room, and the master was at home in it. He sent for Mrs. Donaldson.

That honest but hard-featured dame had

ruled over the old laird from the death of his wife till his own end came, and was trying her best to keep the reins still; but Cathcart was an unruly steed. She was a strict Calvinist of the old school, and had no sympathy with weakness or frivolity of any kind. The young laird was, therefore, a very black sheep in her eyes. She had never seen Mrs. Woodleigh, but had heard of her, and eyed her with no great favour. With woman's instinct, she detected danger, and it was with more than her usual sourness of aspect that she listened to the affable lady.

'I believe you are parting with one of your servants, Mrs. Donaldson. I am just in want of a housemaid, so I thought I would see what character you can give this girl who is leaving you.'

'Oo, the lassie's well enough, nae doubt; but she's ower licht-headed for me, and she winna haud frae singing about the house on the Lord's Day. She's honest, but young

and feckless. She might dae weel enough for you hows'ever.'

There was a certain amount of contempt conveyed both in the manner and matter of this speech; but Mrs. Woodleigh did not choose to take offence. She smiled as affably as ever. By-and-by, when the servant question was disposed of, she turned to Mr. Cathcart.

'Has Mr. Scott told you what we want to consult you about?'

'No; but I cannot think of anything that two such clever ladies should wish to consult a stupid fellow like me about.'

'We want to get up a Christmas-tree for the children all round. Of course I know that it is the New Year you think most of in Scotland; but then, you know, the Queen keeps up old Christmas customs just as much as she does those of Hallowe'en, and we thought it would be such a novelty for the children.'

'Oh, I see,' replied Cathcart, laughing

heartily; 'then the advice you want is doubtless of the very substantial kind.'

Mrs. Woodleigh smiled appreciatively, saying :

'I believe you are as clever as your dear friend Mr. Wardlaw, though you pretend to be stupid just to put us off our guard. But we want you to lend a room for the entertainment, and we want Mrs. Donaldson——'

Mrs. Donaldson was grim and unsympathetic. She now ejaculated in righteous wrath :

'Chrissamas-trees ! na, na. I'll hae naething adae wi' sic Popery stuff. I'm sure Mester M'Dougal wad never hae heard speak o' siccan a thing.'

Mr. M'Dougal was the late parish minister. Fire and brimstone had played a very prominent part in his weekly sermons, and Mrs. Donaldson had found the new minister 'gey fusionless in his discoorses ;' but she had put it down to his youth, and thought

he 'might mend' with time. Now, however, she was prepared to believe any ill of him when he could countenance such folly as a Christmas-tree.

Cathcart had not been in a hurry to go to Dunlarig. He admired Mrs. Woodleigh, but he was not blind to the fact that it was highly improbable that the object of his admiration would be waylaid by innumerable suitors. He did not wish her to be treated with incivility in his house, however, especially by an old woman of whose perpetual preachifications he himself was thoroughly tired. Accordingly he snubbed Mrs. Donaldson, who disappeared in a huff, while he proposed to accompany his visitors over the garden and part of the grounds.

Mrs. Woodleigh expressed great admiration of the garden, at the same time suggesting some slight alterations, the advisability of which were admitted by the owner. He played the host in genial, free, and

easy fashion, only showing a little irritation at Mrs. Woodleigh's very frequent references to 'his dear friend' Mr. Wardlaw.

'Really, Mrs. Woodleigh, the friendship between Wardlaw and myself is by no means a very passionate attachment on either side. Think of us as acquaintances who would not mind if their paths were in future to lie as far apart as the North Pole is from the South.'

Mrs. Woodleigh chuckled inwardly, and congratulated herself that the man was getting jealous already. As she drove homewards by-and-by, she employed her time pleasantly in thinking of the improvements she would make at Airdcluny when her reign began. . .

The Christmas treat was given, and under the presiding genius of Mrs. Woodleigh the Christmas-tree was hung with toys enough to make the hearts of the children glad for days after.

During the winter Mr. Cathcart found his way to Dunlarig a good many times, at first as the bearer of little gifts and messages from young Mrs. Scott, but by-and-by on various pretexts of his own. When summer came he might be considered to hold the position of an intimate friend of Mrs. Woodleigh's, if not that of a suitor. It was in the latter character that she regarded him, and it must be admitted that Cathcart's manner towards her in some measure justified her conviction that the end would be a wedding before long.

There was one line in the conduct of his friend which puzzled him for a long time. Notwithstanding the broad hint he had already given her that he did not care to talk about Wardlaw, she was constantly referring to him. For, not quite understanding the man she had to deal with, she imagined that his disinclination to speak about the absent person was due to the animosity supposed to be naturally cherished by a lover towards

a rival ; and, in her worldly wisdom, believing that jealousy was the particular sting most effective in goading a man into a proposal, she continued to use the weapon in the hope of quickening him to the asking point. She even went so far as to leave on the table before him an envelope addressed to her by Wardlaw, and Cathcart of course recognised the writing.

But in these manœuvres she was taking such an egregiously wrong tack that she ran an imminent risk of losing her quarry altogether. She forgot that Cathcart was a man who had sown a very large crop of wild oats, and who was not to be easily caught by woman's wiles. In her eagerness to win the prize she lost her head a little, and failed to use in the right direction the tact with which nature had endowed her. Had she been quite cool it would have been clear to her that a little restraint, even a degree of prudery, would have been most effective with a man who had proved the vanity of

youthful passion, and who was desirous of atoning for the follies of the past by a careful regulation of the future.

He had soon become aware that she had marked him for her prey, and was at first well pleased that her inclination should jump with his own. But when, in her mistaken tactics, she became too effusive, he began to doubt whether it would not be leaping out of the frying-pan into the fire if he were to exchange the puritanic sway of Mrs. Donaldson for the fussy mastership of Mrs. Woodleigh.

At this juncture Balwhap came to him with the story of what was suspected of Kenneth's danger, and the request that he would tell them where Wardlaw was at that time, and what he had been doing during the months past since he had left Dunlarig.

'It would be the greatest pleasure of my life to render a service to Kenneth Gordon,' said the new laird of Airdcluny, 'but, on

my word, Balwhap, I have no idea what he has been doing or where he may be.'

Even as he spoke there flashed upon him the remembrance of the envelope which Mrs. Woodleigh had permitted him to see, and of some significant hints dropped by Smith in the spiteful hope of spoiling the charming widow's little game. Clearly she was in communication with Wardlaw. Well, she was stalking him—why should he not stalk Wardlaw, with her assistance?

'By the Lord, Balwhap, I believe I can find out what you want, and I'll do it,' he exclaimed, with sudden vehemence, striking the table so violently that the glasses danced.

'You needna waste the whusky, a' the same,' rejoined Balwhap, snatching up his glass and emptying it. Then he refilled it, lest another explosion of his host's temper should deprive him of his 'eek.'

'Are you riding or driving?' asked Cathcart.

'Driving, but my beast is not good for much work.'

Cathcart did not wait for any more. He rang the bell and told the servant that the gig was to be got ready instantly, and to see that Balwhap's horse had every attention.

'You must come with me to Dunlarig,' he said, 'and make yourself comfortable at the inn whilst I go up to the house. We can settle afterwards whether we shall go on to Craigness or wait till to-morrow.'

By the time he arrived at Dunlarig Cathcart had regained his customary self-possession, and Mrs. Woodleigh did not keep him waiting long for her in the drawing-room. She was charmed by this unexpected pleasure; he was delighted to find her looking so well, and she was in ecstasies at the idea that he had come to make a formal proposal. He surmised what was passing in her mind, and although he had no intention of committing himself

just yet, he acknowledged that her plump charms pleased him. Besides, it served his present purpose that she should be well disposed towards him.

‘I have come to ask a favour, Mrs. Woodleigh,’ he said, after the preliminary courtesies.

‘And I am delighted to hear it,’ she answered, bowing, ‘for asking a favour is the greatest proof of friendship. I need not say that you will find me ready to grant anything you ask, if it is in my power.’

‘I was confident that your answer would be a gracious one.’

‘What else could it be—to you?’ She was convinced that the next few minutes would decide her position, and blushing slightly, turned her face away, discovering that some nicknacks on a little table beside her required readjustment.

‘I hope you will always be of that mind. At present, however, my request is a simple one. I am particularly desirous of finding

Mr. Drummond Wardlaw's address, and knowing that he corresponds with you, I hoped that you would favour me with the required information.'

Mrs. Woodleigh thought—'He is jealous! How delightful! but I must not scare him away.'

This is what she said :

'I can scarcely give you the address of your friend, as he is cruising in his yacht. But anything sent to his lawyer, Mr. Foulis, of Union Street, will find him ; or you will no doubt obtain all information as to his movements from Sir George, who writes that I may expect him here in a few days.'

'Ah, then there is doubtless an arrangement between them to meet here,' he said quickly ; and then, taking her hand, he added with much warmth, 'I am really very much indebted to you, my dear Mrs. Woodleigh. And now may I ask you to give me a frank answer to one more question ?'

It was coming at last, and she became a little confused.

‘I always wish to speak frankly—to you.’

‘Then may I depend upon you as my friend—as the friend of my friends?’

‘Of course—certainly. How can you doubt it?’

‘You will be *my* friend, no matter what may be Wardlaw’s designs or wishes?’

‘Mr. Wardlaw is nothing more than an acquaintance; *you* are my friend.’

‘Then I shall shortly put you to the proof. Good-bye, Mrs. Woodleigh; you will see me very soon again.’

He was gone, and he had *not* put the question which she had expected and had been waiting for! She was disappointed and somewhat bewildered. There was this consolation, he had asked her most earnestly to be his friend and the friend of his friends. What else could that mean but a veiled proposal? He was shy; she must give

him more encouragement to speak out. Perhaps he would write. No doubt that was what he meant by saying he would shortly put her to the proof. Then how pleasant to think that she would be Mrs. Cathcart of Airdeluny, when Milly was plain Mrs. Gordon of Nowhere! She had now quite made up her mind that Milly was fool enough still to prefer Kenneth to Wardlaw, and thus throw away a coronet.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

COMMANDS.

‘ WE have had visitors the day, my lassie,’ said Mistress Babbie, looking with affectionate admiration at Milly as she came in, complexion tenderly tinted by the sun, cheeks flushed, and hair ruffled by the rude assaults of the sea breezes. ‘ You have missed something with not coming home in good time as I told you.’

‘ Why, who has been here, Babbie dear ? Everybody seems to be having visitors to-day.’

‘ Weel, Balwhap and Mr. Cathcart have been to see Craigie, and they have brought news.’

‘ What !—of Kenneth ? Has Balwhap

had a letter then ? Oh, I wish I had been in ! But how strange of him not to write to me !’

‘Patience, lassie ; you take a body’s breath away, you go so fast. No, they brought no news of Kenneth. I wish they had. It was of somebody else they brought news, and I’m doubting you will not be so pleased to hear it.’

The tears had started to Milly’s eyes, for her friend had unintentionally raised the false hope that the suspense about Kenneth was to be ended, and it was a bitter disappointment to learn that after all no sign had come from him.

Mistress Babbie saw the tears, but she took no notice, save that her voice sounded a little gruff and husky as she proceeded.

‘They say that Wardlaw is cruising about this coast in his yacht, and putting in here and there every now and then. Now, what think you would he be doing that for if he has given you up entirely, as you say

he has? My bonnie bairn, I doubt he'll no be willing to give you up so lightly. What has he come back here for if it is not to get you?'

Milly remained silent. Indeed, she had not paid much attention to the latter part of Miss Pittendreich's speech, for she was thinking of wee Nicol's story of the mysterious visitor, and, putting two and two together, had come to the conclusion that it must have been Wardlaw. But why should he have made such particular inquiries about her goings and comings? What could his object be?

Mistress Babbie, when she had heard the story, gave her opinion without hesitation.

'You see I was right. It is as I was saying. And he was making all these inquiries just to find out when he would have the best chance of catching you. He'll give you no peace now. He will be aye meeting you.'

But Milly, being the soul of truth and

honour herself, was apt to ascribe similar qualities to others. Having accepted Wardlaw's representation of his position and intentions, she gave him credit for a chivalry of behaviour which few men would be capable of conceiving.

'Don't you think, Babbie, it may be quite different? He may have business of his own to see to, and perhaps he only asked about me so as to avoid meeting me, as he knows I should not like it.'

'Od, bairn, I think you would paint the deil white. If I didna know how well you love Kenneth Gordon, I would think you were getting bewitched wi' this man as weel's your father.'

'Please, Babbie, do not you begin to talk nonsense. You're the only sensible friend I have got. But was that really all the news Balwhap and Mr. Cathcart brought? Did they say anything about Kenneth?'

'Of course they spoke about him, but

they don't know any more than we do. However, Mr. Cathcart is a real friend of Kenneth's, that's one good thing.'

Milly could not altogether dismiss the thought of Wardlaw's return from her mind. His mysterious behaviour haunted her as it had done on the occasion of his first coming to Dunlarig. It deprived her of the feeling of peace and security which had made life at Craigness so delightful, and had restored her to vigour and hopefulness.

Consequently, when in a few days she received a letter from her father requiring her to proceed at once to Dunlarig, she was less sorry than she would have been had nothing occurred to interfere with her sense of freedom.

Craigie noticed it as a bad sign of how things were going, that Sir George excused himself from coming to fetch Milly as he had always been in the habit of doing heretofore. His comment to Babbie in private was :

‘Geordie kens that I have sharp e’en, and he is not inclined to hear the truth from anybody the now. I pity him and Milly too. But she is a brave lass, and if trouble comes, as come it will, she will shine the brighter through it, like pure gold after passing through the furnace.’

Mrs. Woodleigh was unusually effusive in her welcome to Milly. Greatly to the girl’s relief, Wardlaw’s name was not even mentioned; but there was such a superabundance of meaning smiles and nods, accompanied by mysterious hints of approaching changes, that she was forced to the conclusion that there was something more in it than merely one of Mrs. Woodleigh’s fussy fits.

As they sat together awaiting Sir George’s arrival, she said to Milly :

‘My dear child, you are looking beautiful. I am sure Sir George will be pleased to see you so much better. But it was too

bad of you to stay away so long, when perhaps we shall not have much time together now.'

'Are you going to leave us? or what is going to happen?'

'Oh,' said Mrs. Woodleigh, with one of her suggestive smiles, 'I do not know of anything particular that is to happen. But changes do come sometimes, you know, to all of us.'

'What can she mean?' thought Milly. 'Really people seem to get more extraordinary every day; nobody does what one expects them to do.' Aloud she continued: 'I wonder what papa will be like—there he is!' she exclaimed, as the carriage wheels sounded in the avenue.

She ran to the door to meet him; but his manner chilled her. There was no response to her joyous greeting. He kissed her, indeed; but there was no caress in the touch of his lips. Presently, when the light fell full on his face, she gave a startled cry:

‘Why, papa dear, you have been ill—and you never told me!’

‘Nonsense, Milly,’ answered the father, in an irritated tone. ‘I am quite well. I want my dinner, that is all.’

And giving some order to the servant about his things, he went to his room without paying more attention to his daughter, who walked slowly away, her mind full of loving anxiety. Mrs. Woodleigh comforted her by saying :

‘He is only tired, child. A man is always cross and tired, you know, at the end of a long journey—especially if he is hungry. He will be himself again to-morrow.’

But Sir George was not himself again ‘to-morrow’—far from it. The whole household soon noticed the change in him, to their cost. He had always been a strict master ; but had prided himself on being an appreciative one, who knew when and how to praise each of his servants, so as to

keep them in good humour, and make them eager to distinguish themselves. Now, however, he seemed to have suddenly developed a 'temper.'

The town butler announced one morning that 'master was a-cussin for hall the world as hif he was a born herl.' The cook, finding master so 'ill to please,' concluded from the bitterness of her own experience that he must have the 'teethache.' As for John, the coachman, his opinion was that 'the Scotch air and the Scotch whisky were maybe ower strong for the mester's head after sic a long spell o' Lunnon fog and ditch-water.'

When Milly saw how ill her father continued to look, and noticed all the signs of irritation in his behaviour, she remembered the hints which had been dropped at different times by Craigie as to some business difficulties. Concluding that these difficulties must be of so serious a nature that they were preying on his mind, she

determined to seek an interview with him alone. Besides, she was anxious to find out if he had heard anything of Kenneth.

One morning after breakfast (which Sir George had taken in his own room), Milly went to him in the library. He looked up as she entered, and said in an abrupt tone :

‘Well, what do you want?’

This from her father, the courtly Sir George, who had always had some playful speech or affectionate compliment to greet her with ! It seemed impossible.

She went up to him and made an effort to resume her old caressing ways with him, but he checked her with a frown.

‘If you have anything particular to say, say it quickly, for I am very busy.’

‘I wanted to speak to you, papa, because you do not know how ill you are looking. Is anything worrying you ? Tell me about it. I am not a mere child now, you know, and it might do you good to talk to me about it.’

‘I told you before that I was quite well, Milly. Is that all you had to say to me?’

Milly hesitated a little before she continued :

‘Not quite all, papa. I wanted to ask you about Kenneth. I have not heard anything of him for a long time. Have you had——’

But Sir George interrupted :

‘Don’t speak to me about Kenneth Gordon. He is an ungrateful clodhopper. Not heard of him ! No, and you shall not hear of him. Understand once for all—I will not allow you either to write to him or receive letters from him again. What do you think of his audacity—the scoundrel ! He draws upon me for enormous sums, and does not condescend to tell me what he wants them for or where he is going to. It was a bad day for me when I gave him the power to injure me as he is doing. However, if it opens your eyes and makes

you behave like a sensible girl, there will have been some good in it after all.'

Milly had stood aghast on hearing such an accusation brought against Kenneth, and could not speak at first for pain and astonishment; but now she exclaimed :

'There must be some mistake. Kenneth would never do anything dishonourable. You have been deceived, I am sure of that.'

'You are sure of that, are you!' thundered Sir George. 'Ay, so am I. Deceived by Gordon and by you. *You!* with your sympathy and your mealy-mouthed "Papa dear, you are worried," and then to stand up there defending the cur who has treated me with the basest ingratitude. But I'll tell you what it is, you are not to get over me. I will be obeyed—I will have my way. Do you hear me? I will have my way.'

Sir George's manner was so excited, the expression of his face was so different from anything that Milly had ever seen, that she was alarmed.

She was not a coward to be terrified by a scolding. But there was something more in this. She began to fear that her father's reason must be affected, and, restraining her inclination to defend Kenneth, she determined to do all in her power to allay her parent's unnatural excitement. She therefore listened submissively as he proceeded :

‘ In future I am not going to argue with you. It is your duty to do as I bid you. The house which I am preparing for you in London will be ready in October. You are to consider yourself as the affianced bride of my friend Drummond Wardlaw. I intend you to be the Countess of Benvoir. Meantime, in order that you may hold no communications unsuitable to the proud position which I mean you to occupy, you will not go outside the grounds in future without my special permission, and you will not leave the house without a proper attendant. These are my orders. They must be obeyed. Do you understand ?’

Milly looked at her father with anxious, pitying eyes, but she answered simply :

‘ Yes, papa.’

She was wondering what could have upset him in this way, making him so unlike himself, and what the mystery could be about Kenneth.

‘ You may go now,’ said her father, with a wave of his hand as if he had been a king dismissing a troublesome subject.

For a moment Milly paused ; but her presence seemed to irritate him, and she quietly quitted the room.

What was to be done now ? How was she to act so as to soothe the irritation of mind from which her father was suffering, and at the same time keep faith with Kenneth ?

The most pressing duty was to her father. She would refrain from all mention of Kenneth, as the subject seemed to excite him so terribly. As for the stain cast on her lover’s character, that would be cleared, she knew.

Her faith never wavered for an instant, but her proud spirit rebelled against her father for being so ready to condemn Kenneth in his absence, and for having so little trust in one who had never given him cause to doubt his integrity. It was difficult to be silent, but she felt that it was right, and she was sure that Kenneth would have thought so too.

As for the announcement concerning Wardlaw, she still had faith in his pledge; and at the worst it was utterly impossible for her father to force her to marry anyone but Kenneth. There was no need for active opposition now. But if only she knew where Kenneth was! What could be the reason of his silence?

A few days after Sir George's interview with Milly he met Wardlaw in Aberdeen. With fiendish ingenuity the latter worked upon the knight's weaknesses, finally suggesting with mock humility that it was perfectly natural, of course, that he

should wish to see how the lawsuit was decided before giving his daughter to him.

Sir George seemed to have shut his eyes to all reason and justice, and to be possessed by the one idea that Wardlaw was the rightful Earl, and his daughter should be the Countess.

The result of this interview in Aberdeen was that Sir George informed Milly in the evening that she was to be prepared to accompany him on a cruise of a week or two in Mr. Drummond Wardlaw's yacht.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SURPRISES.

MILLY was in a state of supreme bewilderment as well as distress. In the simple course of her life she had never had occasion to seek consolation from confidants, because she had never had anything to confide to anybody except her love to Kenneth, and that was confided to himself alone.

Now—with her father in his present strange humour, and resolved apparently that her marriage with Wardlaw should take place forthwith, and Kenneth not only far away, but absolutely silent to her and to all his friends—how was she to act so that she might save her father from excitement and pain? Of course, there was the satisfaction

of knowing that Wardlaw had pledged himself to withdraw from the contest for her hand, and he had given the pledge with such an appearance of emotional sincerity that she was still inclined to trust him, notwithstanding his singular conduct in cruising about the coast and his inquisitive visit to wee Nicol Johnstone.

But it was difficult to endure the restriction upon her correspondence with Craigness, and she felt angry on discovering that she was not to be allowed to go beyond the grounds without being accompanied by Smith.

That saucy personage had been promised a handsome present to take care of her young mistress, and the prospect of the reward, combined with her inborn delight in marring other people's pleasure, as well as the gratification she found in being at liberty to control the actions of anyone above her own position, rendered her a most faithful watch-dog.

No matter when Milly might rise in the morning, Smith was sure to be in the hall, dressed and ready to accompany her wherever she might go. Poor Milly had never a thought that a bribe would win the woman to do anything she wished ; but that innocence saved her from betrayal where a heavier bribe might be offered.

At last, however, she lost patience, and told Smith that she was going out, but did not require her attendance.

‘ I beg pardon, miss,’ replied Smith, with mock humility, ‘ but the master says I am to go with you.’

With some difficulty Milly suppressed the angry words which leaped to her tongue. She answered quietly :

‘ Very well, Smith ; I am going back to my room, and I suppose my father will permit me to be alone there.’

She went to her room, closing and locking the door before she sat down to consider

how she was to act in the extraordinary position in which she was placed.

She found it difficult to believe that her father would understand the extremities to which he had driven her. He had been always so kind and so generous in all his actions that it was impossible for her to conceive how he could suddenly change his whole nature and determine, for the gratification of a small vanity, to subject her to a life of what was worse than misery—a life of falsehood. For she would be false to every instinct of her being if she were to unite herself with anyone but Kenneth Gordon.

On that point she had made up her mind long ago, and nothing that her father could do or say could induce her to alter her determination.

Here the strength of the girl's spirit was proved—the same spirit which enabled her to face the snowstorm, and save a man's

life when all others hung back and regarded her as almost insane.

But there was something more difficult to face in the present case than a snow-storm. She had to consider in what degree her conduct might affect her father. It was clear that he could not be aware of the harm he was likely to do in this endeavour to control her will. It was painfully clear to her that his mind had been in some way distorted by his craze for emblems of nobility, which were to her of no account at all.

What was her duty? She owed to her father gratitude for years of kindness, respect for his years of experience, and obedience as his child. On the other hand, her whole future life was at stake. She had decided, or rather the inexplicable spirit of love had directed her, to trust that future to Kenneth. She could not alter the decision, even if she would. It was no use trying to look at the matter calmly,

for the soul spoke in the girl, and it said, 'I love Kenneth—I love Kenneth.'

How was she to act with that phrase thrilling through every fibre of her being?

She determined upon a very sensible course of conduct. It was necessary that her father should have things properly explained to him; and as he would not listen to her, she must call for the aid of Craigie and his sister, to whose counsels he could not refuse attention.

Accordingly, she wrote to Mistress Babbie to that effect, telling her at the same time that she was a prisoner, requiring comfort and advice, and asking her to come soon to Dunlarig. The letter was given to Smith to post. A week passed, and there was no answer.

Then Milly knew that her letters were intercepted. She was angry at this new indignity, and rendered the more anxious about her father, because this was a degree of tyranny for which nothing in his previous

conduct had prepared her. So, on his account as well as her own, her wits went to work.

The post-office at the village was kept by a widow, who combined with her official business the retailing of bread, scones, buns or cookies, and confectionery of various sorts. One of Milly's small pleasures had been to teach the dog, Ossian, to go to the shop with a penny, which he exchanged for a scone. Afterwards he learned to fetch papers and letters from the post-office, and earned renown in consequence throughout the neighbourhood.

She wrote a second letter to Mistress Babbie, and, having whistled for Ossian, she went out for a walk in the grounds, accompanied as usual by the indefatigable Smith. On this occasion, however, instead of proceeding to the gardens, she went down the avenue. On reaching the gate she told the keeper that the dog wanted to go out.

As soon as the gate was opened she gave Ossian the letter and cried ' Off !'

The dog, associating the letter and the post-office with the idea of scones, started at full speed. At the post-office he put his paws on the counter, the postmistress took the letter from him, and finding it duly stamped and directed, put it in the mail-bag. Although Ossian had no penny on this occasion, she gave him credit to the extent of a halfpenny-worth of his favourite sweets wrapped up in 'paper, which he conscientiously carried back to his young mistress.

Ossian had his reward. The sweets were to Milly the token that her letter had been safely despatched, and she dealt them out to her messenger with unsparing hand. He gambolled about, and in dog-fashion laughed heartily at the chagrin of the discomfited Smith. He seemed to understand that he had done something to spite that personage, and to be proud of his triumph

over her. So thought Milly, and her face was brightened by the first real smile which had appeared on it since she left Craigness.

Smith had been completely baffled by the ingenuity of her mistress and the sagacity of Ossian ; but she was enabled to endure the temporary defeat by the belief that victory must be hers in the end. The letter had gone, no doubt, but the answer could not pass without her leave.

The incident was duly reported to Sir George ; Smith was authorized to meet the postman on his round, and to bring all letters straight to the study.

So Milly received no answer to her letter, and was peremptorily ordered to be ready in two days to proceed to Aberdeen, where Wardlaw's yacht was waiting to take them on the proposed cruise. The intimation was given in such a manner that she knew there was no hope of any further postponement of the date appointed for the dreaded voyage.

On the afternoon of the day following Ossian's enterprise, Milly was seated in a rustic chair on the lawn. She had a book in her hand, but her eyes turned more frequently towards the mountain-tops than to the page before her. Ossian lay at her feet, and Smith, dutifully in attendance as usual, occupied a camp-stool a little way behind her, busy with some sewing-work.

Coming up the avenue was a man with bent shoulders and long grey hair. He used a heavy staff to help him in walking, and he carried a pack. Such characters were so strictly forbidden to approach the house of Dunlarig that Milly was puzzled to make out how the man had been allowed to pass the gates ; and she was presently astounded by seeing the man turn from the avenue and make straight towards her.

Smith was so intent upon her occupation that she did not observe him till he was actually beside her mistress.

‘ Asking your pardon, my lady, I have

some braw things to show you,' mumbled the man in loud guttural accents, and then in a quick undertone added : ' Don't start. Send that woman away.'

It was Kenneth Gordon who spoke.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A STRANGE INTERVIEW.

MILLY was startled by the discovery that Kenneth was there beside her.

Kenneth, who had been in her thoughts in every moment of the days and months which had passed since his departure—Kenneth, regarding whom she had been so anxious since the arrival of Leslie's letter—Kenneth, about whose fate she had been torturing herself, was there within reach of her hand, and yet he was telling her that she must not show surprise or give any sign that she regarded him as anything but the packman he pretended to be.

The self-control which she had been obliged to practise of late for her father's

sake stood her in good stead now. She restrained the impulse to cry out in mingled joy and surprise. The suddenness of the shock, and the greatness of the effort required, made her heart almost stand still, and Kenneth was alarmed by the pale, rigid look on her face.

Beginning to undo his pack, he said in a hurried whisper :

‘Be brave. Do not betray the secret, for my sake and your father’s, but get the woman away.’

‘What shall I say to her?’ murmured Milly, and the question was addressed to herself as much as to Kenneth. Before the extraordinary alteration in her father, it would have been the most easy and natural thing in the world to have told Smith to go into the house ; but now, it was necessary to find some sufficient pretext.

Kenneth suggested :

‘Send her for Sir George. She can say

that a person has come from George Town, who could give him news.'

Poor Smith ! a moment's yielding to the weakness of human nature deprived her of a great opportunity. Her intentness on her work was more apparent than real ; for, having arisen at a much earlier hour than was usual or agreeable to her, she had succumbed to the soothing influence of the warm sunshine and the gentle zephyrs, and was nodding at her post. Her young mistress's voice aroused her, and in a half-dazed way she proceeded to obey mechanically. When near the house, she was seized with misgivings ; but turning, she saw the grey-haired pedlar holding up some ribbons, and Milly apparently examining them eagerly. Smith soliloquized :

'What a fool I am ! Miss Milly only wants to frighten the man away. That's why she sends me for Sir George—— This is a dull hole—no decent shops near. I should like to have a look at the old

fellow's things. I'll get that cap and see if he 'as a ribbon to match it. He won't run away with her all in a minute, I suppose. Did I dream it, or did she say something about George Town? I'll ask Mr. Jones if he knows where master is, and if he'll 'ave an eye to the pedlar till I come back.'

So they were alone, but for the obtrusive gaze of the windows. They exchanged a long, glad look of love, and the colour returned to Milly's cheeks. She had often wondered where and how they would meet again; and latterly, during the long silence, she had had wild thoughts of crossing the ocean to nurse her lover if he was ill. But such a meeting as this had never entered into her imagination.

'Kenneth!' she gasped, 'what is wrong, that you have come to me like this?'

'There is very serious wrong, Milly, and if you and I and our friends cannot prevent

it, there will be terrible harm done. My lass, I do want to take you in my arms and kiss you, but I cannot do that now. Listen, for I must make haste. I do not want to be here when that woman comes back. She is quick-witted, I know, with all her silliness. You were right and more than right about Wardlaw. He is a thorough-paced villain. He had more reasons than one for wishing to get me out of the way. His design was to kill me and to rob your father. He desired my death, because that would put an end to the question of his right of succession to the Earldom of Benvoir. I do not myself yet clearly understand the position in which I am placed—the thing is so wild and strange that I cannot realize it. But if the information I have obtained has any truth in it, the object which your father desires so eagerly, and for which he is ready to sacrifice us both, will be accomplished, and our happiness ensured at the same time.'

‘Thank God for that assurance—but I do not understand,’ was the hysterical exclamation of the girl.

‘It is most difficult to understand,’ he went on in his steady undertone. ‘You must wait patiently like me for the light which is near ; and, meanwhile, you must follow my instructions implicitly. I speak with bitter regret that I did not obey your instincts, instead of my own, regarding Wardlaw. He sent with me a man commissioned to murder me.’

‘Oh, Kenneth !’ was her horror-stricken ejaculation.

‘Yes, and he nearly succeeded, too. But it was you who saved me, my love. I was writing a letter to you, and had stopped to think of you. It was a pleasant evening, and it came into my head that you might perhaps be out with Ossian on the hillside. I felt as if you were thinking of me, and that I should be nearer you if I were out of doors, too ; so I got up, and was in the

doorway when there occurred an explosion just where I had been sitting. The table was blown to pieces, and one portion struck me on the head, rendering me unconscious. My right arm was broken. It was found that a dynamite machine had been placed under the table. And the last letter I wrote to you was destroyed.'

'You must not leave me again, Kenneth. Oh, I am so glad you are safe back—but, are you safe? Wardlaw is here. How did you find out about his treachery?'

'His agent, Tom Davis, confessed that he had done it, and that Wardlaw himself had come to George Town on purpose to stir him up.'

'But, Kenneth, Tom Davis was the man you told me about—that you did so much for. What an ungrateful monster he must have been !'

'It was his business to make himself agreeable to me. However, poor fellow, he belonged to one of these dynamite

societies in which Wardlaw seems to hold some high position, and he had power over this man because he had failed to carry into effect an attempt upon the Queen's life. They are a set of miserable skunks, more afraid of each other than of the law. Any man who disobeys the rules laid down for him is punished with death. The unlucky wretch, Davis, failed in the task for which he was appointed, and knew that death was to be the punishment of his failure. Wardlaw screened him, but only on condition that he should take my life.'

'It is no wonder that I feared this man !' murmured Milly.

Kenneth proceeded with his story thus :

'He skulked about after the explosion long enough to discover that he had not succeeded in his mission, and then, aware that his fellow-workmen would lynch him if they caught him, he made his way to San Antonio. There he wrote a long bombastic letter, in which he told me that

his life was a misery to him, as every man's hand was against him — that he meant to put an end to it, that he had already placed a machine similar to the one he had used for me under the bed on which he was lying, and that he was employing his last moments not to benefit me, but to harm his worst enemy, Wardlaw. Besides the information that he had been sent out for the express purpose of murdering me, he also gave me particulars of a scheme by which Wardlaw intended to ruin my character, whilst obtaining large sums of money from your father.'

'The mean, double-faced scoundrel!' exclaimed Milly, with passionate contempt.

'As if that were not enough, he told me that there was a plot to assassinate the Queen, that he had been unable to do it, but that Wardlaw on his return to Aberdeen would set other agents to work. He bade me make haste back to England if I wished to frustrate Wardlaw's schemes, and ended

by asking me to think of him as of one who chose to leave a world which did not value him.'

'And did he really die?' asked she. Kenneth's tale had produced the same effect on her as a horrible dream, yet a dream from which she dared not struggle to awake, lest she should lose hold of the one joyous fact that Kenneth was near her.

'As soon as I was able for it I went to San Antonio to the lodgings from which he had written, and found that he had indeed attempted to destroy himself in the manner described; but he had failed in that, too. He was lying there so severely injured, however, that the doctor whom the people of the house had called in did not believe that he would recover, and in any case he will be a perpetual cripple. He was quite able to understand and to answer me, and his replies made me feel certain of the truth of his information. I had doubted it, thinking that it might be some new trick

or the hallucination of madness, for I am certain that the man is or was mad. I saw that the only course for all our sakes was to proceed at once to England, and it was in order more effectually to baffle Wardlaw that I determined to come in disguise.'

'But what am I to do, Kenneth? My father is to take me with him on board Mr. Wardlaw's yacht to-morrow, and I do not know how long we are to remain there. The thought of it was horrible before, even when I believed that Mr. Wardlaw meant to behave honourably. I imagined that it was only a craze of poor papa's, for he is dreadfully changed, Kenneth. It makes me miserable to see him, and I do not know what to do. I had made up my mind to go quietly, as I have tried not to vex him in any way, but now I cannot go with that villain. What am I to do?'

'You are to trust yourself to me, Milly. Will you do that?'

‘Ay, Kenneth—but how? And what of my father?’

‘He will not be harmed. But you must put faith in me and Craigie, and Mistress Babbie. There is Smith coming back; I was prepared for the possibility of not seeing you alone, so I have told you what you must do in a letter which is concealed under the ribbon on this card. It is my favourite colour; you will take the whole piece, and give Smith this one to divert her thoughts. Farewell till to-night, my own brave lass.’

Closing his pack hastily, Kenneth made for the avenue. But he forgot his part somewhat, and Smith, who was hurrying back eager to match a ribbon, was amazed at the vigorous strides by which he distanced her. She was obliged to give up the attempt to overtake him, and came towards her young mistress, whom she scanned with a curious gaze.

There was matter for curiosity indeed in

Milly's appearance and attitude, for she sat looking in bewilderment after Kenneth, with tears in her eyes and with outstretched hand clutching the card of ribbon which he had given her.

Recovering her presence of mind quickly, she gave Smith the ribbon intended for her, and asked her why she had been so long away.

'If you please, miss, if you send me on a goose's chase, you need not wonder that I don't get back all in a minute ; but you seem to have been well entertained by the pedlar.'

Smith was irritated out of her usual sleek assumption of humility by the suspicion that she had been in some way befooled ; but Milly was too preoccupied to heed her impertinence, and rising, proceeded to the house, eager to be in the solitude of her own room, so that she might read Kenneth's letter and know what she was to do.

Smith cudgelled her brains for some

means of solving the mystery of the strange results of the packman's visit, and determined to be more vigilant than ever.

When the door of the room was closed, Milly hastened to unwind the ribbon, and, having found the letter, opened it with quivering fingers.

Besides the information which Kenneth had given her by word of mouth, the letter contained the following :

‘I have learnt that when you are on board the yacht your father and Wardlaw intend to force you into some sort of marriage. I now ask you to take a very serious step—one only justified by the very extraordinary circumstances in which we are placed. Come to me. Let us be married at once. It is the only way to checkmate Wardlaw, and, owing to the revelations made to me since my return, it is also the only way to ensure the fulfilment of your father's great desire,

and prevent him from being duped in regard to you as well as in money matters.

‘In taking this step it is your own feeling for me and faith in me that must guide you. Still, it will comfort you to know that Craigie and Mistress Babbie are of the same mind with me.

‘I shall have a carriage waiting for you at the end of the village at eight o’clock to-morrow evening. It will take you to Craigness, where all will be in readiness for us.’

* * * * *

Half an hour passed, and Milly still sat with her elbow resting on the little table by the window, and Kenneth’s letter open before her. She had been listening intently to all that heart, reason, and conscience had to say to her in this crisis of her life.

Raising her head and looking out with tender sadness in her eyes towards the dark mass of Benlarig, she said half aloud :

‘ Yes, Kenneth, it is best for all. I will come to you.’

But there was a dark cloud hanging over the Lovers’ Cairn, and the girl’s heart was heavy with forebodings of evil.

At the sound of her father’s voice raised in anger she started up, and, for the first time in her life, felt afraid to meet him. But he was calling her, and presently opening the door, she was told by Smith to go at once to the drawing-room.

There Sir George sternly informed her in Mrs. Woodleigh’s presence that, for reasons into which it was not necessary to enter, he would join Wardlaw in Aberdeen that afternoon—that they had business to transact together which would occupy the whole of the following day ; but that, on the day after, she was to join them

without fail, and Mrs. Woodleigh and Smith would accompany her to the Imperial Hotel.

Addressing Mrs. Woodleigh with almost a threat in his tone, he said :

‘I hold you responsible, madam, for the appearance of my daughter at the time appointed.’

Mrs. Woodleigh gazed at the knight in some amazement at his extraordinary demeanour ; but she, too, had noticed the alteration in him, and had privately concluded that he must be taking more wine than was good for him. She gave him a polite assurance that his wishes would be attended to.

Milly received her father’s commands in silence, but with loving reproach and pity in her eyes and heart. She immediately returned to her room, remembering with some anxiety that she had left her letter open on the table. Nothing, however,

seemed to have been disturbed, and she was reassured.

But Smith had not missed her opportunity this time.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE ELOPEMENT.

ALTHOUGH Milly had made up her mind to fulfil her promise to Kenneth, and to carry out his wishes, she was not free from misgivings as to the rightness of her resolve.

It meant that she was going to deceive her father, and perhaps to leave him altogether. The thought of the deceit which she must practise was very bitter to her, as by nature she was frank and truthful, and had no sympathy with the spirit of intrigue.

At the same time, when she considered all the dangers which surrounded herself, and all the dangers which threatened her father, she could not help feeling that there

was justification for consenting to the plan which Kenneth had proposed.

One source of great mental torture was the dread of the consequences to her father when first he should become aware of her apparent treachery and defiance of his commands. She was haunted by the fear that the shock would totally upset his already tottering brain, and that he might never regain the balance of his mind.

But there was this wonderful story of Kenneth's about grannie's revelations, and it would be a far more terrible shock for poor Sir George if he were to find when too late that he had betrayed his daughter; and had been duped of his property, by so black a villain as Wardlaw.

Sir George's departure was a great comfort to Milly. She was relieved from the necessity of playing a part, and the thought of going away by stealth was made more endurable. It was one thing to leave her father in his home to be terrified and mad-

dened by her strange and sudden departure, and quite a different thing not to go to him under circumstances which he knew to be hateful to her.

At intervals she felt a thrill of joy at the thought that so soon Kenneth and she would join hands never to be parted ; but this was only a passing gleam, and unpleasant thoughts soon darkened the prospect.

Sleep was long in coming to Milly's excited brain.

The question arose in her mind, would she ever return to Dunlarig ; or would Sir George, like some stern parents she had read of, refuse to forgive her, and forbid her ever to come into his presence again ? This seemed quite possible in the light of his changed demeanour since his return from London.

She determined to visit all her favourite haunts next day with Ossian, and especially to make a farewell pilgrimage to the Cairn.

But there was that terrible Smith. How was she to get rid of her? The only hope was that, Sir George being absent, her vigilance would be relaxed.

Awaking early from a short and troubled sleep, Milly felt oppressed by a sense that something dreadful was going to happen. She rose and dressed hastily, endeavouring by unusual energy to shake off the feelings which threatened to overpower her.

As she opened her window, the sad thought came to her that perhaps she would never again look from it on the fresh beauty of the morning world. It was a very still morning. Not a leaf stirred. Benlarig seemed to be watching in stern silence for the departure of one of his children.

‘Dear old Benlarig?’ exclaimed Milly with quivering lips, ‘have not you, even, got a smile for Kenneth and me to-day? Yet you know how we both love you. Never mind. I am coming to say good-bye to you all the same. . . . Ossian, Ossian!’

Here, good dog, brave dog ! Come for your last scamper.'

Ossian gambolled and barked with delight.

'Here, you poor, foolish dog ! Come and listen. Do you know what is to happen to-day ?'

With eyes intent on his young mistress's face, and his tail expressive of a question mark, he waited for further light.

'Dear old doggie, I am going to leave you.'

Tail lowered in sympathy.

'But you'll come to me and Kenneth, won't you ?'

Gentle wag of affection.

'Now, then, off we go !'

And the dog expressed his hope that things were all right again, by renewed leaping and barking ; but he returned more frequently than usual from his explorations to the girl's side, and looked up to see what were the signs of the weather in the beloved

face. He became gradually convinced in his loving canine heart that all was not well, and giving up his amusements, he trotted soberly beside her, determined that at least no harm should reach her that he could ward off.

Smith had failed to appear this morning, but to Milly's astonishment and vexation, here she was now coming down the path from the Cairn. Still more to her astonishment the maid did not offer to accompany her; but said that she had just been out to get a whiff of fresh air, as she was to be very busy in the house all day with packing.

She looked at Milly with a significant smile, which conveyed to her mind the impression that this woman knew about the plan for forcing her to marry Wardlaw.

'I suppose,' thought Milly, 'they all judge from my silence that I am resigned, and that they need not watch me any more.'

It was fortunate that she had her farewell visits to pay, for she was so anxious and restless that it would have been impossible for her to have remained quiet.

Several times in the day she saw Smith, and each time there was some meaning smile or look which seemed to say: 'I know all about it.'

Milly hoped that the woman would not try to make up for neglect during the day by extraordinary vigilance in the evening. She did not like to dwell upon the exact moment of going away. Each time she tried to think of a distinct plan for evading observation her heart and brain seemed to become sick and numbed. At last she gave up trying, and determined to wait till the arrival of the actual necessity forced her courage and skill to awake.

The day wore on, and the stillness and sultriness of the atmosphere increased, making it more difficult for the poor girl

to throw off the depression that possessed her.

It seemed as if the trees were afraid to twitter their leaves, lest they should disturb the solemn silence. Towards evening the sky became of a slate-blue colour, and Benlarig had covered his head with angry clouds.

Mrs. Woodleigh was hardly visible all day long, having various important domestic duties to attend to ; but Milly and she met at dinner in the evening.

The girl was pale, and could not respond to Mrs. Woodleigh's expressions of curiosity as to whether Mr. Wardlaw had changed much since they saw him — where he would take them to in his yacht — and whether he had had many new adventures during his mysterious absence.

Noticing at last how silent her companion was, Mrs. Woodleigh asked her if she did not feel well.

Milly replied truthfully enough that her head ached. She might have added that her heart ached too.

‘Poor child,’ sympathized Mrs. Woodleigh, ‘you have been walking too much on such an oppressive day as this is. It is stifling. I find it almost impossible to breathe. We shall have a dreadful storm soon, I am sure. But it will be more pleasant afterwards. It is a good thing you were not going away to-night. A thunderstorm at sea would be dreadful. You might be drowned.’

‘I love a storm at sea!’ exclaimed Milly, with sudden energy; ‘and rather than live in that man’s yacht I would be drowned a hundred times!’

Any outside turmoil would have been a relief to her overwrought nerves. The stillness exasperated them.

‘My dear girl,’ remonstrated Mrs. Woodleigh, startled by the unexpected outburst, ‘you are certainly in a fair way to a fit of

hysterics. I think you had better go and lie down.'

Milly went to her room ; but she did not lie down. It was time to start.

She hastily wrote a few lines to Mrs. Woodleigh, telling her that she was not to be alarmed on finding her gone—that she was going to Craigness, as she could not join her father on Mr. Wardlaw's yacht—that she would write to him explaining matters fully, and that she hoped Mrs. Woodleigh would forgive any trouble she might occasion her by her flight. This note she laid on the dressing-table.

Then, putting on her usual walking attire and taking a cloak over her arm as her only preparation for travelling, she gave one farewell glance round the room which she was deserting, and opening the door, hastened along the corridor.

Smith was nowhere to be seen.

Downstairs the drawing-room door was open. No one was there. The windows

had been left unclosed to admit as much air as possible on that oppressive day. But the wind was rising—some scraps of paper were fluttering about—so she noticed as she hurriedly crossed the room and stepped out on the terrace. She walked quietly towards the avenue, but as soon as she was screened from observation she quickened her steps.

The trees were creaking now as their boughs swayed in the rising wind. They seemed to be mourning for her departure. It had grown very dark, and just as Milly reached the gates the storm began.

There was a flash of lightning, and the wind suddenly roared through the great trees with a sound like the rush of the breakers on a reef.

In a few seconds Milly reached the end of the village. A carriage stood there. A strange man held the door open, and said to her :

‘Get in, miss, if you please. The packman will join us in a few minutes.’

Milly entered the carriage.

Was she dreaming, or was her brain distracted, too, like her father's? There in the corner of the carriage opposite to her sat Smith, smiling as she had smiled in the morning. What did it mean? Where was Kenneth? The driver had sprung hastily to the box, and the horses were going very fast. Smith was the first to speak.

‘You are surprised to see me here, Miss Milly, but I was to tell you that the packman has made it worth my while to go with you, so that you may not be alone.’

‘But where is—the packman?’ asked Milly, with suppressed excitement. She was about to say Kenneth, but stopped, not knowing how much he had told.

Smith relieved her from doubt.

‘Mr. Gordon will get up on the box when we have driven a little farther. He

told me to tell you that he has good reasons for not coming inside with you. You are not to speak to him till he speaks to you.'

Milly was bewildered. It was well that Kenneth had warned her to do his bidding, however strange it might appear to her, for this was beyond her comprehension. How could he have taken such a woman as Smith into his confidence ?

The carriage stopped ; a man dressed as a pedlar got up quickly beside the driver. Milly hoped he would make some sign to her, but he did not speak, and it was too dark to see his face.

She felt anxious and inclined to rebel against this treatment. Then she reproached herself for want of faith in Kenneth. Leaning her head back wearily and closing her eyes, she tried to think what his reason could be for so much mystery.

But having slept so little the night before, and having been out of doors nearly

all day struggling with her thoughts, Milly was utterly exhausted. The motion of the carriage lulled her into an uneasy slumber.

Smith hastily took a handkerchief from her handbag, and bending over, laid it lightly on the girl's face. In a few minutes she removed it. Milly was in a sound sleep, and she slept on though the storm increased.

Flashes of lightning succeeded each other at shorter and shorter intervals. The thunderclaps seemed to burst directly overhead, and the heavy rain lashed against the glass of the carriage as if determined to break through and rouse the sleeper.

Now and again Smith replaced the handkerchief on the girl's face, but her hands trembled with terror as she did so, for she dreaded thunder and lightning.

At the first lull of the storm the carriage stopped. The packman got down and looked into the carriage.

Smith said in a loud whisper :

‘ She is sleeping beautifully. But, Lord, what a night ! I hope we shan’t be long gettin’ there.’

‘ There is nothing to be afraid of, my good woman. See that she does not wake too soon, and your fortune is made.’

The door closed. The seeming pedlar got on the box again, and the driver lashed the horses till they galloped as if they were running a race with the clouds.

The storm abated ; the sky cleared ; the moon looked down in tranquil splendour on the troubled waters and the runaways’ carriage.

Milly still slept on.

The lights of Aberdeen came in sight. The carriage was driven rapidly through the town, and stopped on one of the quays. Some one whistled.

Two stalwart tars appeared, and, lifting Milly out of the carriage, carried her on board a smart yacht which lay alongside.

Smith followed, and saw her young mistress laid, still sleeping, in the berth which had been prepared for her.

As the two men returned on deck, one said to the other gruffly :

‘ Allus thought skipper a rum cove. But this ’ere’s the rummest go of all. First, the old boy ; then the gal. Wonder if there be any more on ’em.’

‘ I’m blest !’ answered his brother tar, shifting his quid.

There was bustle on board the boat for some time. Steam was up. The anchor was weighed, and the trim yacht made its way gracefully out of the harbour.

The early dawn streaked the horizon when Milly awoke. Her eyelids were heavy, and consciousness came to her slowly. Becoming aware of the unaccustomed movement, she remembered the carriage and opened her eyes quickly.

‘ Where am I ? This is not the carriage. Kenneth !—I must be dreaming.’

Rubbing her eyes, she sat up and saw through the porthole the heaving of the waves. The horrible truth forced itself upon her.

‘I am betrayed!’ she cried in bitter anguish. ‘This is Wardlaw’s yacht.’

END OF VOL. II.

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